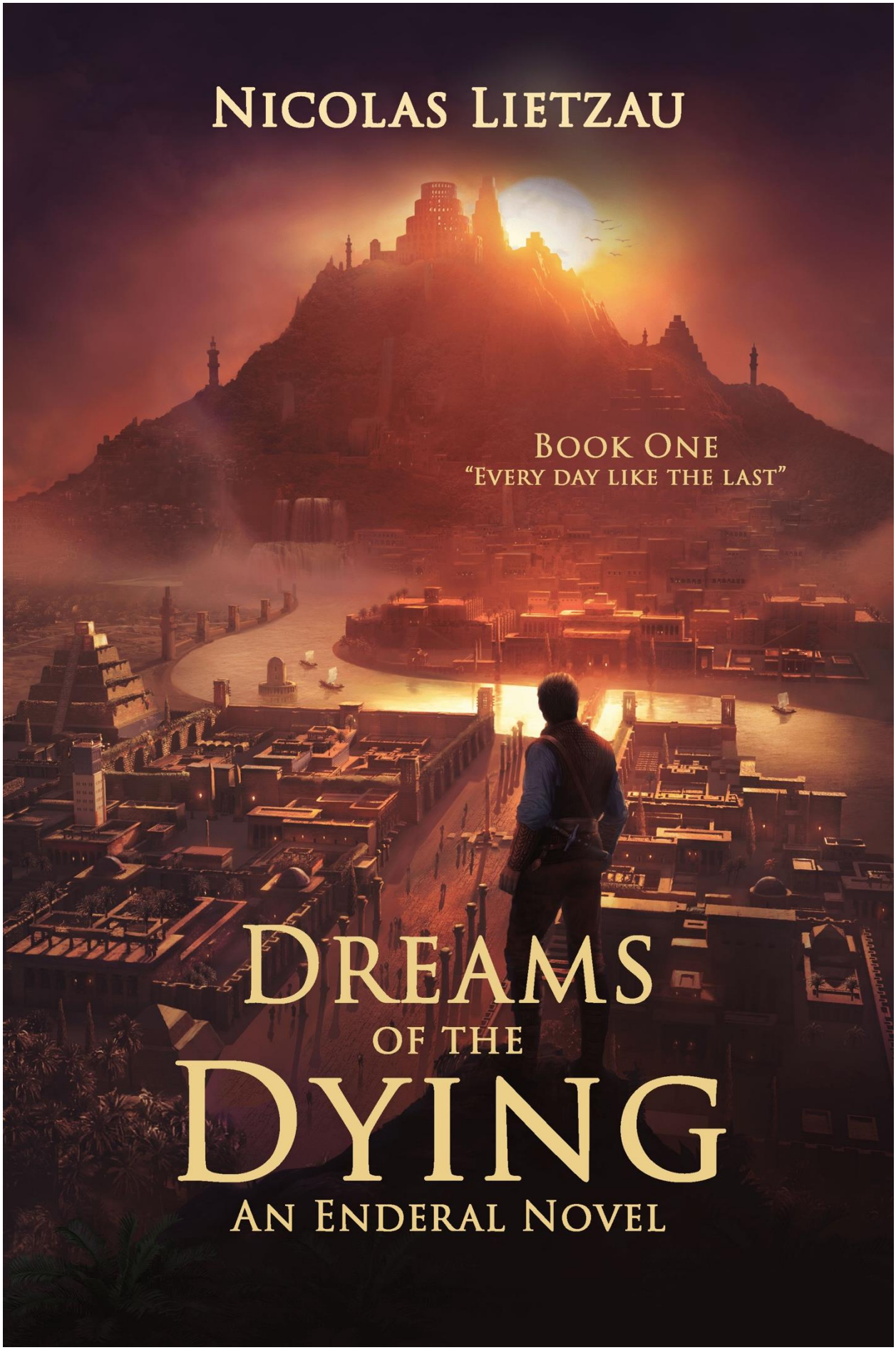
Nicolas Lietzau
Book One
"Every day like the last"
Dreams
of the
Dying
An Enderal Novel

Dreams of the Dying

An Enderal Novel

By

Nicolas Lietzau

Book One

“Every Day Like the Last”

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Cover Art by Stefan Stankovic
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The Kilean Archipelago
BLUE ISLAND COALITION
KIVA
JUNIL
KEFA
XUURO
UUNIL-YÂR
(THE GOLDEN CITY)
MOUNT UUNIL
THE SEVENTH ZIGGURAT
TEENOS
PORT VAJU
THE YANDIBLES
CROSSROADS TAVERN
MOUNT KAARA
KAARA MANOR
YUVA
VIVUU

Prologue

My Judgment Is

"Do you know why you are here?"

SILENCE FILLED THE COURTROOM. All eyes were on Jespar: judge, jury, and spectators. Arched windows lined each of the side walls, allowing slivers of evening sunlight to fall into the otherwise dark hall.

"...I'm not here."

"Speak louder, boy," the Corpse on the judge's bench said.

"I'm not here," Jespar repeated, his voice trembling. He forced himself to meet the Corpse's eyes. "This is a dream."

The Corpse smiled faintly. A maggot crawled out of his right ear, disappearing down the side of his neck. "It seems you're as cunning as rumored. Yes, boy, you are in a dream. Does it matter?"

Cold spread in Jespar's gut, worms of ice hatching from their eggs.

A little taste of what's to come, a voice in his head said. The narrator—he knew him well.

Like most recurring dreams, this one had a structure. Jespar thought of it as an abandoned theater, showing the play the recesses of his mind had written for him. In this place, however, "him" was a loose term, since his consciousness had split from his body the moment he entered the dream. Within it, Jespar was a puppet, with no control over his physical actions, but still he felt it all: every emotion, every sensation, from the steel shackles cutting into the puppet's ankles to the horror that would inevitably follow. Second was the narrator, a voice that commented on the events as they unfolded, speaking all the truths and thoughts that, in waking life, his mind tried to bury. Finally,

there was the prisoner—the fragment of himself that remained aware throughout it all, knowing it was a dream but unable to change its course.

"Why does it matter?" the Corpse repeated.

Jespar swallowed. "Because it's not- Because it's not real. None of you are real."

The audience chuckled.

"Is that so? Then tell me, why don't you leave? Why don't you simply snap your fingers and propel yourself back into the reality you came from?" He snapped his fingers to illustrate the point. His nails were so long they curled.

Jespar tried to reply, but all that came out was a croak. This evoked more laughter from the audience.

Even here, you're making a fool of yourself.

"Correct," the Corpse said. "Because you can't." His gaze drifted as he rubbed his chin with thumb and index finger. Though everything else about his appearance suggested rot—the greasy hair, the snot and dirt in his beard, the flies circling about him—his skin was strangely intact, clean and smooth except for the deep frown lines. And still, something about it was off, wrong, as if some madman had dug his skull from a grave and stretched someone else's face over it in a bad attempt to disguise what was beneath. As if to underline the thought, the Corpse's fingertips left dents in his face when he withdrew them, like they would have on a warm candle.

"Our minds decide what's real, boy," he said. "That is why we love, hate, hope, why we believe in gods that do not exist. So, Jespar Mitumial Dal'Varek, let me repeat my question: Do you know why you're here?"

"You're not—"

He didn't finish the sentence, as suddenly the cold shot up his esophagus, into his chest, his neck, the bones of his skull. Suddenly, everything seemed too bright, too loud, too intense. Bile rose in his throat at the ubiquitous stench of decay; the sunlight through the windows burnt his cheeks, the stares of the audience bore into his back.

Pathetic.

Gods, you're so pathetic.

With a sob, he covered his head with his hands and shut his eyes, waiting for the feeling to subside. When it finally did and he dared to look up again, the Corpse's eyes, the color of dirty ice, were locked with his.

The Corpse shook his head.

His expression had changed—the disgust was still there, but there was now something else. Disappointment. Shame. Contempt.

"It appears you need a reminder," he said, gesturing to the guards at Jespar's sides, both of them spitting images of the Corpse. The left one drew a blue piece of cloth from under his armor and tossed it at Jespar's knees.

Look at that.

"What do you see?" the Corpse asked.

The only memory you didn't bury.

"Not real," Jespar whispered, his breath coming in fits. "You're not real."

The Corpse's mouth smiled, but his eyes didn't. "Maybe not. But my judgment is." He pointed at the cloth. "This, boy, is a scarf ... as you well know. It's the one she gave you only months before you abandoned her. Was it easy for you, I wonder? Turning your back on her only a year after you found her in those bloodstained sheets, the knife still in her hands? Yes, I suppose it was—you've done it before, as we all can testify."

The audience booed. Someone from the jury spit on Jespar, the spittle hitting his left cheek. His throat drew tighter, the cold sunk deeper. It paralyzed him now, his neck, his lungs, his tongue. He tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. When Jespar glanced up at the judge's bench again, something was happening to the Corpse's skin, something that changed the way it stretched and contracted over the muscles of his face.

Softer, Jespar realized. It grew softer.

Malleable.

"Well, it seems like this is going nowhere," said the Corpse when the noise had finally abated. "You leave me no choice." He turned to the two juries, seven Corpses each, sitting on two raised aisles perpendicular to the dais. They all looked like him.

"Guilty or not?"

"Guilty!" they shouted. The audience joined in, all of them sharing the Corpse's face, repeating the word over and over. Their voices filled the temple-like hall with an incantation.

The Corpse stood. The skin on his cheeks had now begun to melt, oozing down his face like wax. "Jespar Dal'Varek!" he shouted, his voice drowning the chanting. "You are hereby found guilty! Guilty of being a coward! Guilty of being a failure! Guilty of being a traitor to your own flesh and blood!"

He slammed his gavel onto the stone bench.

The crowd went mad. Deafening cheers shook the hall; people jumped up from their seats, applauded, screamed, hurled insults like stones.

No, he tried to whisper, but his vocal cords, frozen stiff, wouldn't oblige. He pressed his hands against his temples and shut his eyes like a child wishing the monsters away. Please, no.

Yes, Jespar.

This is how it ends.

How it has to.

When the cheers died down, the Corpse slowly descended the dais, the skin still dripping from his face. "As punishment," he said, "your body will serve to carry out the justice you've denied us."

He halted only a few steps from Jespar and studied him for a breath. Then he stooped down and grabbed him by the hair, yanking his head up so their eyes were level. By now, half the Corpse's face had dissolved, leaving behind a mask of muscle and bone, droplets of skin gathering on his jawline like mildew.

"Do you know what that means, boy?"

You're not real, Jespar tried to say. You're dead.

Though he hadn't spoken, the Corpse frowned. "Well, that is precisely the point, isn't it? We are dead, so we can't carry out the justice you've denied us. We can't because our bodies are useless."

There was a long pause.

"Unlike yours."

In a sudden motion, he drew a knife from under his robes, and sliced off a patch of skin from Jespar's face. Jespar screamed, kicked, convulsed, but the two guards pinned him down, their grip ironclad. The Corpse held up the bloody piece of skin in triumph, then slapped it onto his cheek where it stuck and conformed to his flesh like paper pulp. The Corpse smiled.

This is how it ends.

"See? It's simple. If you won't do your duty, then we will just borrow your useless skin and do it ourselves."

How it has to.

He turned to the rest of the room. "He's all yours."

With his last word, everyone leaped to their feet, and barged towards Jespar. Knives flashed in their hands.

Because you deserve it.

Chapter 1

Golden Soil

ALONG WITH POVERTY, WARS, AND BAD WINE, Jespar had always considered low-hanging ceiling beams over beds one of the worst inventions of mankind. He was also one of those unfortunate few whose subconscious minds didn't remind them of the danger looming above them on their way up—which is why reality greeted him with an explosion of pain when he jerked awake and slammed his forehead right into thirty pounds of house support.

He cried out and fell back into bed, hands pressed against the point of impact. When the pain finally subsided, memories of his nightmare returned.

Again.

He had never been what one might call a sound sleeper—five hours counted as a good night's rest—but recently, things had gone from potty to shithouse. Jespar exhaled and massaged his eyeballs. They always stung when he had slept badly.

"I'm awake," he said. "I'm awake."

When his mind finally accepted this statement as truth, it realized something else: he had no idea where he was. He blinked again to ease the burning, then looked around.

He was in a stuffy room, one whose poor condition its owner had tried to conceal with an abundance of furniture. Somehow, each piece managed to look cheap despite its curvy design and red upholstery. Jespar's bed was no exception: though wide and with wooden snake carvings for bedposts, peeling paint and dried stains of dubious origin on the bedding thwarted any flair of elegance.

Where the hell am—

The door burst open. A mountain of fat and muscle in screaming green clothes stood in the doorframe, head ducking under the lintel.

"That the *kazuum*?" he asked someone in the hallway behind him.

Muttered agreement.

Jespar barely had time to get out of bed and raise his hands before the mountain was in front of him, and a fist came flying towards him. Instinctively, Jespar attempted a dodge. It might have succeeded if a headache hadn't decided to flare up that very moment. The fist sunk into his gut and hurled him back onto the bed.

Gasping, Jespar shielded his face and looked for the next blow, but it never came. Instead, the man loomed over him, his tree-trunk arms crossed over his chest.

"That was for scaring the girls with your godsdamned screaming." He held out his hand, palm open. "Now, pay up." His Inâl had the typical accent of his country: Stretching the vowels and softening the consonants. *Pey awp.*

"What—"

"You paid for an evening, not a sleepover... that's fifty sêr extra. Now pay up and get your face out of here before I stuff it up your ass, curl you into a ball, and make you leave through the window." *Weenduw.*

Girls? Jespar wanted to ask, but at last, things fell into place. He glanced at the stains on the bed. Noticed the sweet smell of ammoniac in the air.

Cringed.

"Okay," he said. "Sure, I'll pay." He rummaged his pockets for coins. Counted them. Thirty-two. "That's all I—"

The next punch knocked him flat.

Two minutes later, he was on his ass in the mud of an alley. Something splashed into a puddle beside him, spraying brown water all over his clothes. The door of the brothel slammed shut.

For a moment, Jespar didn't move. The alley was empty except for a woman carrying a basket, and a fat cat, both of which eyed him suspiciously. With a groan and as much dignity as he could muster, Jespar picked himself up and gathered his belongings. The woman cast him a pitying glance, then went about her way; the cat studied him a little longer.

"What are you looking at?" Jespar said.

If cats could shrug, this one would have. Instead, it scurried away.

"Right." Jespar sighed into the empty alley. As if headache and bruises weren't enough, an itch flared up between his shoulders. He scratched it.

"Right," he repeated.

Judging by the color of the sky, it would be at least two hours before the sun came up, and he wouldn't meet his employer until noon—plenty of time to get ready and explore this strange and wonderful city around him. But somehow, the enthusiasm failed to materialize. Why? After all, an adventure was what he'd come here for.

Wasn't it?

He wiped sweat off his forehead and looked up. Even from here, cramped between the buildings of a coastal town's alley, he could see the colossal white walls of his destination rising in the distance.

Uunil-Yâr. The Golden City, heart of the Kiléan archipelago, and richest metropolis in the Civilized World.

Jespar adjusted his blue scarf and started walking. In the half-light of dawn, the island slowly woke from its slumber.

***

After roaming the alleys for a while, Jespar finally found his way back to the marina. He sat down on an abandoned crate and took a moment to calm his post-inebrious headache and appreciate the view. The sun had just begun to rise, tinting the morning fog above the ocean a pale orange.

Pretty.

When Uunil-Yâr itself had denied Jespar's ship entry due to an overcrowded harbor, the captain anchored in Port Vaju, one of the coastal towns, nestled in an idyllic cove just a few miles from the capital. Though this was his first day in Kilé and he hadn't even reached the city yet, he already understood why Kilé found mention in so many stories and songs.

First, there was the landscape: White beaches that stretched for miles, speckled with palm trees and shrubs flowing into the jungle further inland; the turquoise ocean; Green mountains rising in the distance.

Second: the city.

Even from Port Vaju, what Jespar could see of Uunil-Yâr in the distance was breathtaking. The metropolis was built around its namesake, Mount Uunil, and while the walls obscured its lower parts, the districts built around the mountain's slopes spoke for themselves: masterworks of whitewashed stone, growing bigger and bigger as they scaled the mountain. Palaces towered around the peak, and though only four of them were on the side facing Port Vaju, Jespar knew there were seven in total. *The ziggurats*. Homes of the seven Magnates, the richest and most powerful merchants of the archipelago.

The writers and poets might have used more colorful descriptions to describe the distinct style of Kiléan architecture, but the term that came to Jespar's mind when he studied the buildings was "blocky pyramids." While the smaller houses simply seemed like differently sized blocks of stone stacked upon and into one another, the mansions further up the mountain and the ziggurats beyond were piles of square platforms where each story was smaller than the one below. Rows of pillars and greenery framed each stage, and gardens adorned the flat rooftops.

The Golden City. It was beautiful, no point denying it.

Jespar scratched his back. There was a foul taste in his mouth, so he took a swig from his water flask, gurgled, then spit it out. Down by the harbor promenade, three kids were playing some kind of game that involved tossing colored stones into a chalk circle they had drawn on the cobblestone. They were so tanned their brown skin was almost black.

Little by little, his memories of the previous night returned. He remembered fetching drinks with a couple of sailors from his ship, which explained the headache. He remembered a Kiléan betting game and a bar fight, which explained his empty purse and the bruises on his ribs that weren't the bouncer's doing. He remembered two whores, a young man with thinning hair and a woman with a heavily painted face, who had both probably looked better when he'd been drunk.

Jespar sighed.

Wasn't it supposed to be different this time? If that mysterious contact of his didn't turn out to be a fraud, the job would pay enough for him to afford passage back to Enderal and rebuild his life there.

Yours and hers.

A virtuous undertaking, no doubt. With moderate success, Jespar tried to imagine a tale starting with the hero getting shit-faced with two Kiléan whores.

He stood up and searched each of his pockets for coin. Thankfully, he found some in the inside pockets of his leather armor that the bouncer hadn't noticed. Twenty-one sêr. Just about enough for a breakfast, a bath, and a handful of nightflower leaves. The former two he needed, the latter he wanted. He decided to start with the bath.

***

As he sauntered down the pier in search of a bathing house, he let his new impressions of the city settle in. It confirmed many of the preconceptions he'd had about Kilé, but disproved others. As he had suspected, the contrast between the haves and have-nots was stark, even in a town like Port Vaju: While frescoes and statues adorned the Blue Islands Coalition's trading office, makeshift posts and scaffolding kept the back-alley houses from falling apart.

As he had suspected, no one paid him much attention, despite the color of his skin making him stick out like a pigeon among blackbirds. Just another traveler. On the other hand, he was surprised to see many people wearing copper rings around their upper arms, symbols of religious devotion—even though the Kiléans were considered godless by the more pious countries. When he reached the market square, he saw a priestess in orange robes kneeling in its center, in front of a statue that depicted a middle-aged woman in robes. In her right hand, the statue held a sheaf of wheat, in her left, a basket. Stone scarabs scuttled at her feet.

Morala, Jespar thought as the smell of burnt herbs wafted towards him. The Light-Born of Trade, Fertility, and Cunning, and the Goddess of Kilé.

Arms crossed, Jespar watched the priestess perform her ritual. While the wreath of herbs burnt away, she first touched her forehead, then her temples, then her heart. She sprinkled water over the wreath, remained until the flames had died, then finally stood and went about her way.

Interesting.

Despite being Endralean, Jespar held little love for the Light-Born. That hadn't always been the case; when he'd learned about them as a boy, they had enthralled him. How could they not? Seven mages had transcended their humanity to become gods and pursue the goal of uniting the fractured world Vyn had become since Starfall. As he grew up, he'd realized that the Light-Born faced the same problems most idealists do eventually: the world is a muddle of discord that doesn't necessarily want to be united. And even eternal life, powerful magic, and pretty scepters don't always cut it.

Yes, *these* gods did actually exist, observing humankind and passing judgment from a city in the clouds, led by Tyr, their eldest. Yes, each of them reigned over one of the Civilized continents. And yet, nowadays these gods were little more than symbols. Why? Two reasons. One, each of these gods relied on a mundane faction or sovereign to carry out its will, and, naturally, most of these factions or sovereigns had wills of their own. Two, they rarely ever intervened or showed themselves, and "rarely" meant maybe once in a hundred years. Even then it was mostly the Holy Order, their army which ruled over Enderal and dished out the beatings when conflict arose that was too severe for even the Light-Born to ignore.

Gods?

Or just immortal sovereigns?

To Jespar, the answer was clear. When he had voiced the idea to his tutor, wondering aloud if the Light-Born had perhaps grown bored of mankind's perpetual stupidity, the tutor had answered with a beating. Nowadays, he thought there was more truth to the thought than his morose tutor had been willing to admit, the man whose face always looked like he suffered from volatile bowel movements. If even the most steadfast of human souls wearied after decades of politics, why should the immortal mind be any

different? Probably, young Jespar had figured, they had turned towards the more pleasant aspects of life. He knew he would have. Preferably those involving wine, food, and lots of naked skin.

What set Kilé apart from the other countries was that its rulers, the Blue Islands Coalition, didn't even bother feigning devoutness. Of course, they were all terribly afraid of Light-Born Morala's judgment, but even the most pious of minds couldn't deny that the latter shared her throne with at least seven other pairs of divine buttocks: The Magnates.

And yet there they were—prayer rings, priestesses, statues. Probably, Jespar decided, it was ultimately about making sure. You revered the Magnates and strove for their wealth, but said your prayers just in case the Light-Born did in fact have a say in your afterlife experience.

I confess, now pass me the wine.

Grinning, Jespar went on. The sun was now fully up, the last tinge of red gone blue. It was getting hot, and he really needed that bath.

When he arrived in the bathhouse, he was greeted by a porcelain-skinned young clerk with a daring chin beard.

"May you prosper, *ma'sao*" he said. "Have you come to indulge in the divine waters of our humble establishment?"

Jespar tried a winning smile. "Indeed, I have."

The clerk folded his hands just above his waist. "Very well." *Veel*.

Five minutes later, Jespar was back on the streets. Divine waters or not, thirty sêr for an hour was more than he could afford or was willing to part with. He decided to find a natural pond or river instead and went up to a vegetable vendor at the market square who told him about a natural pool two miles out of town. When Jespar offered him fifty caya, half a sêr, in return, the merchant declined. "Keep it, my friend. You'll need it."

"What do you mean?"

The merchant smiled, but his eyes remained empty. "You'll see, *ma'sao*. You'll see."

In the outer parts of town, the cobblestone gave way to gravel, the stone and wood houses to adobe huts. Half an hour later, Jespar walked down an unpaved path lined by bushes and palms, a banana plantation to his left, the jungle sloping down into the ocean to his right. Birds twittered, insects chirped, waves broke in the distance. Had it not been for the continuous worsening of his itch, Jespar would have marveled at the sight. Finally, the road forked, one way continuing along the shoreline, the other one flowing into a path that cut into the jungle. When Jespar finally heard the sound of a waterfall, sweat was streaming down his face in rivulets.

He stopped when he heard talking.

No, Jespar thought, *not talking. Arguing.* Down the path from the pool, several people shouted and hurled insults at each other. Hesitating, he walked on. The path wound its way through the jungle a little longer, then went down a steep slope. Jespar stopped.

"Wow."

At the foot of the hill lay a bright blue pool, nestled in a natural rock basin. Bushes and trees flourished on its terrace, where a river from the mountains poured over its edge in a curtain of water. Vines and lianas climbed down the sand-colored stone.

He licked his lips, uncorked his bottle, and drank the last of his water. The shouting went on.

Jespar began the descent. Only when he had almost reached the basin did he see who the voices belonged to. Four people stood on the shingle of the pond, two men, a woman, and a child. One of the men did most of the insult-hurling, which was directed at the woman. Her answers were calm but underpinned by aggression. The woman and the second man belonged to the Blue Guard, as their indigo-dyed leather armor testified.

All the way out here?

Jespar looked for a spot to observe the situation from afar and found it behind a large rhododendron bush. The shouting man, who appeared to be the father of the girl, had a broad back and dark skin and wore his salt-and-pepper hair tied into a ponytail. With his round face, broad lips, and bamboo-leaf eyes, he looked different than most Kiléans, but

when Jespar saw the tattoos around his eyes, he realized the man and the child were Makehu—archipelago natives.

"...been using this place for generations," the man said. "*Kweh*, we have a right to be here!"

"*Yuz*, and no one is denying you that right, as we've told you ten times in the past fifteen minutes," the guardswoman answered. "Maybe I need to write it down for you? Or say it in your language?"

The other guard winced. "Veena..."

"What? He obviously doesn't understand Inâl."

The man's fists clenched. "This is because we're Makehu, isn't it? Some new scheme you *Wakhem* came up with."

The guardswoman rolled her eyes. "Don't be silly. The decree applies to everyone, Makehu, Kiléan, or unicorn."

"Look, *ma'sao*," the guardsman joined in. "We're sorry for the inconvenience, but we're just following orders. By the rules of the Golden Soil Decree, these waters belong to Magnate Vel'Nyx now, and she decided everybody who wants to use them has to pay. Makehu, Kiléan, outsider. So, unless you're able to do so, I suggest you—"

The man shoved him. Eyes and mouth wide open, the guard flailed his arms for a moment, then fell down hard on the shingle. The girl let out a scream.

"Fuck your suggestions!" the Makehu said. "*Kweh,* I was working for the Coalition when you were still shitting in your mothers' laps! Do you really think this godsdamned uniform gives you the right to order me around? *You*?"

The guardswoman drew her scimitar. "All right, you coinless piece of shit, that cuts it. You're going to jail."

The Makehu took a step towards her, jaw flexed. His daughter pulled at his woven skirt, but he ignored it. "Make me."

Even though a good ten arm-lengths separated them and Jespar, something about the way the man moved made the hair on Jespar's neck stand up.

Hatred.

Jespar could imagine the man's irises, fire blazing on a soil that had been sucked dry by years of drought and had only been waiting for the decisive spark. Just when Jespar considered intervening, the girl began to cry.

The situation changed at once. The peasant froze. His eyes flicked to his daughter, to the guardswoman, and back to his daughter again. The corners of his mouth twitched.

At last, his muscles relaxed, though the contempt in his eyes stayed. "Times are changing," he said. "Mark my words, *ma'saa.* Times are changing." He glanced at the downed guard, who looked at him with a mixture of concern and wariness. Then he took his daughter by her hand. She was still sobbing. "Come, *vaota*. We're leaving."

They left, walking right past where Jespar was hiding. He held his breath. Once they were out of sight, the guardswoman turned to her comrade, scimitar still in hand. "What the hell was that?"

"If you want to kill or arrest a man in front of his own daughter, go ahead," the guard said, patting dirt off his armor. "I won't."

The guardswoman stared at him. Then she slammed her weapon back into its sheath. "Whatever. I have to take a piss."

With that, she disappeared in the bushes. Her comrade looked after her, then sat down on a rock near the water.

Jespar seized the chance. The guard didn't notice him until he was on the shingles. A weary frown on his face, he stood up.

"I'm sorry, *ma'sao*, but–"

"It costs... I know."

"Huh." The guard tilted his head. "You're an outlander, aren't you? Where from, Nehrim? I can't place the accent."

"Enderal." Jespar nodded towards the pool. "So, did I understand correctly? This magnificent piece of nature is private property now?"

The guard averted his eyes, rubbed the bridge of his nose. "This 'magnificent piece of nature' and the entire eastern coast of the island, *yuz*. Magnate Vel'Nyx bought it two moons ago, right after the Coalition issued the Golden Soil Decree." He patted the

embroidered crest on his armor, a scarab over two crossed scimitars. The symbol of the Coalition.

"In essence, the Blue Island Coalition put the entire archipelago up for sale. Every forest, every beach, every grain of sand that doesn't already have an owner can now be bought." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Such as this pool here. It's now Magnate Vel'Nyx's property, just like the beach further up north now belongs to Magnate Kuura."

"And this Vel'Mix decided everybody who wants to take a dip now has to pay?"

"Vel'Nyx is her name, and yes. That's why we're here, fulfilling our glorious duty to the Coalition by telling people who barely have enough money to feed their kids to go bathe somewhere else. I guess you overheard our little argument before?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I don't blame the man, you know? Our country has always been run by those with the fattest purses, but charging a working man for wanting to take a godsdamned bath or pick a fruit from some tree out in the wilderness?" He exhaled. "This won't end well, *ma'sao*. It won't end well."

The guardswoman reappeared from the bushes. Deep wrinkles on her forehead contrasted her soft face.

"Anyway," the guard said, patting a pouch tethered to his belt. "For only six sêr, you can splash about in the water like a mermaid. What do you say?"

***

After Jespar had paid, the guards went off for a patrol. Though he wasn't prudish, Jespar appreciated the privacy. He undressed and stashed his few belongings under a little precipice next to the waterfall. Then he walked waist-deep into the pool, cupped his hands, and splashed water in his face.

Divine.

Funny. Bathing was as mundane an act as it could get, but the little pleasures were always where Jespar felt the most at peace. A cup of water after hours of thirst; sun on his eyelids. A fire after a day out in the cold.

You're right, father, he thought. *I've never been a true Dal'Varek.*

Though it had been twelve years, he still vividly remembered his father's lectures about how it was adherence to principles that made a person, his monologues about injustice, righteousness, and the workings of the world. And yet Jespar had never seen him smile—not when he'd eaten the delicacies their chefs conjured up each night, not when he took his evening tea in his wingback chair facing the hearth, not even when Jespar's middle brother had used his entire savings to get Damean Dal'Varek a Starling hunting bow for his name-day.

Maybe that's just the nature of righteousness. It only comes with a steel rod shoved all the way up your ass.

Jespar waited for the ripples to calm.

Ma'sao Dal'Varek, he thought, *you look like shit*.

The face that stared back at him from the reflection looked worse than he had anticipated. His stubble, scarce on his cheeks, dense on chin and upper lip, was too short to pass as a beard and too long to pass as the dashing adventurer's trademark. Bags hung under his eyes, his hair was an unkempt shock of blond bristles.

And the grey had multiplied. He couldn't tell it from the reflection, but he remembered the whore from the previous night joking about it when he'd told her he was only twenty-eight years old.

"I like it," the balding boy had said, tracing his fingers up the inside of Jespar's thigh. "I bet he knows what he's doing."

To his inebriated mind, the comment had been the pinnacle of erotic banter. Now, he cringed at the memory.

He dove under the water.

***

Jespar left the basin feeling rejuvenated. His drowsiness had washed off along with the dirt and the sweat, and the rash between his shoulders—it was a rash, as he'd felt with his fingers—had also gotten better. Jespar gave himself a rudimentary shave with his dagger,

using the water's reflection to guide him. Then he changed into his second set of clothes and, after a moment's consideration, put the blue scarf into his backpack. He returned to Port Vaju.

Two of his remaining fifteen sêr went to a washerwoman to clean his muddy clothes, two to a shoeshine to polish his boots, and four to a baker for breakfast. Around noon, he made for Uunil-Yâr.

There was no need to ask for directions this time. All he had to do was follow the great road that led to the city's gates, trodding along with the stream of travelers, peasants, and fortune-seekers. Trees lined the roadside, surrounded by waist-high grass and myriads of shrubbery. While the coastal breeze remedied the worst of the morning heat, Jespar wondered what it was like behind the walls. The picture of a basket full of crabs rose to mind, scuttling and sizzling under the tropical sun.

He listened as the people chattered about their work, their hopes and worries, and the latest news. While the Kiléan accent gave him some trouble, the Golden Soil Decree came up often, and it seemed the Makehu man at the pool was not the only one enraged about it. There was also talk of a new underground movement that claimed to fight injustice in the country, a trade embargo by Arazeal that threatened many jobs, and some nobleman who had mysteriously disappeared from the public eye. The people suspected kidnapping.

When Jespar reached the eastern gate, his clothes were again drenched in sweat. There was a queue in front of the gatehouse next to the gargantuan white gate that marked the city's entrance, where a burly man either waved the peasants through or denied them entry. When it was Jespar's turn, he braced himself for a volley of questions.

"Papers, pig-skin," the guard greeted him and extended a gloved hand, palm up. Jespar gave him the letter of passage that had come with the invitation. The guard read it a total of three times, his face changing a little more each time, from frown to confusion to bewilderment.

"Where ... where did you get this?"

Jespar started to respond, but he stopped. The letter had come with strict instructions: total secrecy.

"I can't tell. I'm sorry."

The guard eyed him a moment longer, then gave him a tense smile and returned the paper. He bowed deeply. "Thank you, *ma'sao*. Forgive me for keeping you."

You're scared.

Why?

Jespar smiled back. "No sweat." He tucked the letter back into his chest pocket and passed through the gate. *From pig-skin to ma'sao,* he thought. *And all it had taken was a letter*.

He was starting to get curious.

***

A sailor's song claimed that Morala was secretly also the goddess of beauty. It also claimed that the Golden City was her favorite mistress, and that it had been Morala's kisses that had transformed it into the wonder it was.

If that was the case, Jespar decided as Uunil-Yâr unfolded around him, Morala must have preferred some body parts over others. While the districts around the mountain certainly looked magnificent—lots of tongue—the city further down shifted its focus from beauty to function—a kiss on each cheek—while the outer rings seemed designed for the sole purpose of fitting as many people into as little space as possible. Peck on the forehead, *let's just be friends*.

The songs spoke of the palaces but left out the ramshackle buildings, fainted after the bosoms of Kiléan women but overlooked the beggars cowering on the roadside, rhapsodized over the city's unique scent of spices, perfume, and ocean water but failed to mention how it mingled with shit, sweat, and piss.

There were people everywhere, an endless stream drifting through the many streets, alleys, and plazas, people of all colors, shapes and sizes that melted and flowed like an ever-changing kaleidoscope. An incessant din of talking, laughing, and shouting filled the

air, mixing with the sounds of shuffling feet, clanging anvils, barking dogs, and braying donkeys. And as Jespar maneuvered his way through the crowd, he came to a realization.

If the city was a lover, she was a volatile one.

One day, she'd be your wings to the sky, the next, the riptide that drowned you. Her promise was tempting, but her hunger voracious; her lips invited, but her teeth bit hard. There was simply *something* in the air, a sense of motion both intoxicating and invigorating—and Jespar liked it.

He also noticed something else, hidden in the details: how there were more patrols than there should have been in bright daylight, the way the guards' eyes darted about, or the peasants glared at them.

Tension. The city was a fabric stretched to the breaking point.

After getting lost several times, Jespar finally found his destination: the Great Bazaar. As the name suggested, it was a marketplace in the merchant's quarter, the so-called Steel District. A giant stone pavilion sheltered it, allowing the vendors and customers to do business without being cooked alive by the sun, which was now an angry, white disk bearing down from its zenith. Square openings in the pavilion's roof allowed air to circulate and light to illuminate the countless stalls and tables.

When Jespar finally succeeded in squeezing himself through the throng of bodies that clustered at the entrance area, he was stunned.

The assortment was endless. Farmers sold food, blacksmiths tools, and weapons, tailors a multitude of clothes with their trademark lurid colors. A woman with snakelike hair sat behind a table full of gems and pendants and offered to read Jespar's fortune; a bald man in a jade green tunic waved a bottle in his face and promised the concoction it contained would grow his manhood to inconceivable dimensions.

He was making his way down the main aisle when a voice cut through the din.

"Make way! Make way for Third Magnate Vel'Nyx!"

The people in Jespar's aisle obliged immediately and stepped aside to clear a lane in the middle. Jespar followed suit. An armed escort came into sight, at least fifteen Blue Guards protecting a blue and gold palanquin. "Make way for Third Magnate Vel'Nyx!"

the front guard repeated unnecessarily, banging the hilt of his scimitar on his shield at regular intervals. “Make way!”

Necks craned and people stood on their toes as the palanquin passed them by, but since a curtain blocked most of the view inside the palanquin, all Jespar could make out were two people sitting across from each other. Judging by their hands and painted fingernails, both were women, one older than the other. When the escort was through, the lane closed as fast as it had formed and people resumed their business.

***

The meeting point was a *sa’nuu* in a hidden corner of the bazaar. Roughly translating as “tent of dreams,” a sa’nuu was an establishment where customers could consume a variety of drogae, from tobacco to alcohol, from opium to nightflower. Screens covered with rugs dulled the noise and light from the market while blue and violet paper lanterns immersed the place in a dreamy gloom. For two sêr, Jespar ordered a pipe of nightflower and sat down on a chaise in a corner. As he waited for attendant to bring his pipe, he looked around—there were only three other guests, an androgynous, mature woman in gray tunic and pants, with short, black hair in the far left corner of the room, and a young couple on a chaise across from her, kissing vigorously. The boy clearly lacked experience, which he tried to compensate by slobbering all over his sweetheart’s face and passionately massaging her left breast. Jespar grinned.

The attendant brought Jespar’s pipe and offered it to him, bowl first. Jespar smelled the petals, nodded. The attendant lit the coals and left.

Jespar took a deep drag. He reclined against the cushions and took another. When the droga kicked in, warmth rose in his chest, spread into his head and into his limbs. His sight blurred slightly, then sharpened again, the colors now stronger but softer around the edges, like an aquarelle painting. Jespar smiled and closed his eyes. He felt at ease.

An hour passed.

Two.

Jespar left the sa’nuu. Ate something. Came back and ordered another pipe.

Four hours.

When a man and two guards finally entered the establishment, Jespar was drowsy but serene. Both guards wore a full suit of armor fashioned from interlinked steel scales that emitted a subtle turquoise glow. Jespar recognized it as nuvium, an ore as durable at steel while almost as light as leather. *Expensive*, he thought. Back in Enderal, one of these suits would have cost more than a farmer would make in three years of work. The man they escorted wore sapphire robes, and something about his features and skin made Jespar think of a black fox. There wasn't a single hair on his face or scalp.

The man surveyed the room, spotted Jespar, and walked over. There was something slightly off about his gait, but Jespar couldn't put his finger on what it was.

"*Ma'sao* Dal'Varek, I assume?" He spoke flawless Inâl, without a trace of an accent.

Jespar stood and held out his hand. "Yes. You are—"

"Zagash Enkshi, Counselor of your employer," the man replied, ignoring the outstretched hand. "Show me the proof."

Jespar hesitated. Then he reached into his pocket and took out a coin.

When he had first been contacted in Nehrim, his letter had contained instructions to meet with another contact who would verify his identity. They had met in a tavern, where the contact harried him with a barrage of questions. After Jespar had answered to her satisfaction, she passed him an antique-looking coin, along with the letter of passage that had gotten him through the gates earlier.

Enkshi took the coin with a ring-adorned hand, scrutinized it, then dropped it into his pocket. He glanced at the pipe in Jespar's hand. "You were instructed to wait, not to ... indulge."

Jespar smiled apologetically. "I tend to miss that part."

Not even a chuckle. "Follow me."

Without awaiting an answer, Enkshi left. Jespar sighed, then took a last pull at his pipe and followed.

***

Almost immediately after they returned into the heat of the open, Jespar's rash flared up again. The air had cooled a little under the now westering sun but was still stifling. He cursed and scratched himself, which Enkshi observed with a frown. Walking at a brisk pace, he led Jespar through the crowd and several streets, until they arrived in a garden behind an imposing building of the Coalition. A palanquin stood in the shadow of two phoenix palms, backdropped by black and blue rhododendrons. It looked similar to the one that had carried Vel'Nyx in the Bazaar, only it was painted blue and large enough to carry four people. Gold ornaments adorned each side, and dark blue curtains separated the interior from the stifling heat. A uniformed woman with short black hair and shoulders wide enough to rival a woodcutter approached them. Like their escort, she wore nuvium armor.

"Counselor Enkshi," she said, bowing deeply.

"Sergeant Mâadira. Are we ready to leave?" he said.

No introduction. The sergeant gave Jespar an uncertain nod, which he returned.

"Of course," Mâadira said at last, signaling to four bare-breasted men and six guards lounging in the shade. All got up at once.

***

Since the sergeant walked with the guards, Jespar and Enkshi spent the next hours alone in the palanquin. The elegant man with the blue-black skin met every attempt by Jespar to strike up a conversation with one-syllable answers, so Jespar eventually wrote him off as a prick and focused on the surroundings instead. Lulled by the aftereffects of the nightflower and the gentle sway of the palanquin, he had to keep himself from dozing off.

A broad road connected the different districts of the Golden City, meandering all the way up to the top of Mount Uunil. According to the historian on the ship, it went by the name of *Vûa Neya*—Fortune Road—and was not just the city's main surface of transport, but also a symbol.

"Just look at your feet and you know where you're at," the historian had said.

It was true. In the Stone District, the outermost ring of the city where the laborers lived, Fortune Road had barely been more than a stretch of dirt framed by run-down buildings and shops whose colorfully painted walls did little to hide their poor condition. In the Steel District, where the middle class lived and the city slowly adapted its trademark blocky style of architecture, the dirt changed into cobblestone. As the bearers carried the palanquin through the ornamented white gate that marked entrance of the Jade District, the paving turned into flagstone.

The Jade District.

As they went further in, Jespar couldn't help but stare at the display of luxury. To whoever lived here, he concluded, "modesty" was merely seven strangely arranged letters. Even the smallest abodes were so lavish they reduced the sumptuous homes of the lower districts to puppet-houses, featuring multiple storeys, sweeping gardens, and frescoes that adorned the facades. Around every corner, it seemed, was a park with fountains and statues, some of Morala, some of other Light-Born, some of people who had simply reached the point of wealth where rubbing it in everybody's faces became part of the etiquette.

The poor at the bottom, the rich at the peak, Jespar thought. *And Fortune Road leads from one to the other*. Not a very imaginative concept, granted, but honest enough. On the Blue Islands, "working one's way to the top" wasn't just a figure of speech. It was reality.

***

As the escort proceeded further up the mountain, laughter and music became audible in the distance. Jespar squinted, but as the sun was setting in the direction of the noise, it was hard to recognize anything.

"A festivity," Enkshi said. "Magnate Vel'Tuul is celebrating his name-day."

Surprised, Jespar looked up. "Should ... I know him?"

"I'd be surprised. He's the least influential of the Magnates." Touching his upper lip with his thumb, Enkshi twitched his mouth. "Frankly, he's a simpleton who owes his position solely to his parents' hard work. Now that they're dead, all he does is waste their wealth on banquets. If the other nobles didn't enjoy this debauchery so much, I doubt he'd still be in the Coalition."

"I think I know the type," Jespar said, daring a smile.

To his surprise, the Counselor returned it, if only for a flicker. "Every country has its share."

There was a long silence.

Just when Jespar was ready to resume window-staring, Enkshi sighed. "You must understand my reservations, *Ma'sao* Dal'Varek. The mission you were brought here for, it's ... Well; it would be an understatement to call it important. I have gone over the reports on you and, honestly, fail to understand what it is that makes you better than any other contractor here in Uunil-Yâr." He studied his hands. "In fact, I don't see how a mercenary would be able to help us at all."

"For what it's worth," Jespar said, "neither do I."

Another pause. Again, Enkshi touched his upper lip with his thumb. Sunlight reflected on the gold ring that adorned it. When he spoke again, his voice was changed. Flat. Hard.

"Jespar Mitumial Dal'Varek," he said. "Born in Enderal, 8198 after Starfall. You're the last male heir of the Dal'Varek family, most of which perished in a tragic accident twelve years ago. Seven years following said accident, you left your homeland for Nehrim, where you spent the past five years, first as a day laborer, then as a mercenary." He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "So, here's my first question. Why?

According to my sources, the Dal'Vareks were highly respected. As their only heir, you must have had an excellent outlook in Ark's nobility, not to mention the wealth your father probably left behind. Why throw it all away for a life as a..." His nostrils twitched. "A vagrant?"

Jespar hesitated. "How do you know all that?"

Enkshi scoffed. "Did you really think we'd have hired you without checking your background first? Now answer the question: Why did you leave your life in Enderal behind?"

He thought: Because that godsdamned city would have smothered me if I'd stayed.

He said: "I just wanted to see the world."

"See the world," Enkshi echoed. "And that was reason enough for you to leave your own s—"

"Counselor," Jespar said, "would you mind telling me what my teenage years and my motivations for traveling have to do with this mission?"

For a breath, Enkshi frowned. He evidently wasn't used to being interrupted, that much was clear. Jespar held his gaze.

Finally, Enkshi sighed. "Well, I suppose you are right, your adolescence doesn't concern me. What happened afterward, however, does.

"Over the course of these five years, you worked for a variety of employers, from private individuals to guilds and even entire governments. You also participated in the Nehrimese war between the South- and Middlerealm as a member of the Gallowmen—a mercenary corps hired by the Middlerealm's chancellor himself. Four years later, you left them without even collecting the money they still owed you. Why?"

Jespar sighed. Rubbed his throat. "Because I didn't agree with some of the things they did."

"Pillaging?"

"That and more. Look, Counselor, let me be straight with you: If you want me to tell you why someone as obviously influential as your master would ship a no-name mercenary like me all the way to the Blue Islands, I don't know. I'm many things, but

I'm certainly not a hero. However, I'm also not a murderer. Yes, I did some things I'm not proud of, but nothing I can't live with—"

Really?

"—which, again, you probably already know, else I wouldn't be here. So, how about we skip the interrogation and you simply tell me what I'm here for? As long as it doesn't involve the kinds of things I left the Gallowmen for and the pay is right, I promise I'll do all I can to help."

Silence stretched out in the cabin.

The hard look on Enkshi's face disappeared, and he suddenly looked old and very tired. "Tell me, Jespar Dal'Varek: What do you know about dreams?"

Before Jespar could reply, a scream cut through the silence.

Interlude

Thirty-Nine Years Before

IT'S ONE OF the bad days. The catch in the morning: bad. The mood at first meal: bad. Sales at the market: bad. One look at the way Pôpa's jaws work as he stands behind the market stall with his arms crossed is enough to tell the Boy there will be no laughter at dinner tonight. *If there'll even be dinner,* he thinks.

Shortly before midday, a woman approaches them — not a noble, but she wears good clothes. She asks if they have lobsters, which they don't.

"Saaras'Jodule," the woman says. "Ten stinking fish merchants on this market and not a single one has lobsters? No wonder you're coinless."

She stalks off. Pôpa stares after her, on his face that look the Boy has come to detest: anger and defeat, united in the same expression.

An hour later, they are dismantling the stall. A man hurries towards him, his hair windblown. Do they sell lobsters? The price doesn't matter.

"I'm sorry, *ma'sao*," Pôpa says. Though the man is nicer than the woman, he still walks away visibly disappointed.

On the way back, the Boy asks his father the question that has been bothering him ever since the well-dressed woman came: Why indeed *is* no one selling lobsters? He remembers they used to.

Pôpa stifles a laugh. "Because them *kazuum* nobles have done nothing but gorge themselves on them things in the past two years, and now all the grounds have been fished clear."

"They're all gone?" the Boy asks.

"Well, not all. There are a couple of colonies left up near Kiia island, apparently, but the Coalition, of course, forbids fishing them to prevent them from going *ixeent*." He spits. "'Free trade my *kazuum*."

Extinct, the Boy thinks but doesn't say. Not today. It's one of the bad days.

So, he nods and thinks on it.

The rest of the day passes as expected. Mâmah makes dinner, but it's just rice and plantains again, like the days and weeks before. They have leftover dried fish from the market, but Pôpa wants to keep it for tomorrow. The Boy thinks it's stupid. No one will buy old fish. No one ever does. He knows better than to tell Pôpa this.

After he is done eating, Pôpa stands and leaves without a word. Mâmah looks after him and sighs. The Boy helps her clean up, then goes outside to play.

He finds Pôpa on his wicker chair in front of the house. The sun has just disappeared behind the tree line, sending scattered slivers of light through the palm fronds and the pink myrtles. There's a bottle in Pôpa's hand. "Rice drink" is what he calls it, but the Boy isn't stupid. He knows the name other people use.

"Pôpa?"

Pôpa looks up. "What?"

The Boy tells him. There are no lobsters left to catch, he understands that. But what if they could sell them without actually having to catch them first?

Pôpa shakes his head. "You're not making sense, son. Go to bed."

But the Boy continues talking. When you cut away the shell, he explains, lobster meat is white with a tinge of red, and it tastes mild and a little sweet, almost like emperor shrimps. With a bit of red salt for the color and some cane sugar for the taste, who'd know the difference?

"Hold on—are you suggesting we sell shrimps as lobsters?"

The Boy shrugs.

"You're a fool," Pôpa says. "The people want the whole thing, shell and feelers and all, alive if possible. No way they're going to buy chunks of strange-looking meat."

"But what if we're the only ones selling it?" the Boy argues. "And when they ask why we don't sell them whole, well, couldn't we just tell them that they're from up north and that we need to cut them up and salt them so they don't go foul during transport?"

Long pause.

"What if anyone finds out?" Pôpa asks. "The Coalition's going to whip our backs till we bleed."

The Boy allows himself a grin. "Why, then we just tell the Coalition the truth: they aren't real lobsters, so we're innocent. We'll just pay everyone a game penny and that's it."

"They won't never buy from us again."

"Why not? 'If you signed the deal, don't whine if they steal.' It's not like we'd be poisoning them, is it? They wanted lobster, so we gave them something that looks and tastes just like it. And even if they do figure it out, they'll probably just compliment us on our wit. I mean, isn't that precisely what makes our country greater than others? That Morala favors the bold, the cunning, and those who create their own fortune? We wouldn't be committing a crime, Pôpa. We'd only be playing the game the way the winners do."

He copied the last two sentences almost word for word from two merchants he had overheard at the market earlier this week. He likes how they sound.

Silence. A mantis hops onto the armrest of the wicker chair. Inside, dishes clatter. Mâmah.

At last, Pôpa's lips curl in a grin, and for a breath, the Boy is the proudest child on Kilé. Patting his thigh, Pôpa says. "Come here, son."

The Boy does as asked. Pôpa's breath smells of "rice drink," but today, the Boy doesn't mind.

Pôpa begins to massage the Boy's right shoulder, the way he always does when the Boy has done something right. It's all he ever does—no kind words, no hugs, no kisses. When the Boy once saw Ruuke's father give him a kiss on the forehead, he was surprised. Ruuke is the kid from the plantain farm further up the jungle, and the Boy

doesn't care much for him, not just because his father is a sissy who pecks his kids the way only mothers should, but because Ruuke's a simpleton, a kazuum, whose horizon starts at playing Wadwê with the other boys and ends at Vareena's "raven-black hair." He actually thinks that comparison makes him sound smart. The Boy is too young to realize that for most people of his village, including his parents, it probably does.

"Bright child . . . such a bright child," Pôpa says, continuing to knead the Boy's shoulder. "You always were. Gods, how happy I am to have you. After all, I'm just a simple, coinless kazuum, right? A simple, coinless kazuum who's too stupid to understand the way smart people like you think. How happy I am to have you." He kneads harder, digs his thumb into the flesh of the Boy's shoulder.

The Boy's smile falters. "Pôpa—"

"You know what I think, son? I think you need a lesson." The Boy tries to get up, but Pôpa wraps his arm around his chest and keeps him in place. "I thought I taught you this already, but I guess I was wrong."

With that, he stands and yanks the Boy up by his neck. The Boy isn't smiling now—he is grimacing, kicking and trying to break free, but it's pointless. Pôpa drags him over to a nearby barrel. There was a constant downpour last night, so it's filled to the brim with rainwater.

"Pôpa—"

Pôpa pushes the Boy's head into the barrel. The world goes dark. Warm water burns his eyeballs, floods his mouth. Instinctively, the Boy screams, letting water into his larynx; coughs, sucks in more.

He can't, the Boy thinks. *He can't.*

Harsh words, yuz. Clouts to the ear, yuz. Two strikes on his thighs with the cane that time the Boy broke the fishing rod, yuz.

But this? No.

It's a lesson, he somehow manages to think through the panic, while his lungs fill with fire. *It's a lesson, and any moment now, he'll pull me up. He has to.*

He doesn't.

He has to, the Boy thinks again and again, while his survival instincts kick in, while he flails his arms and struggles as his lungs fill with water.

He has to.

He doesn't.

His sight blackens. His muscles weaken.

Air.

He is back above the water now, his lungs aflame, his throat filled with coals, and his heart racing. He gasps for air, sucking more water into his windpipe, coughs it out, wheezes, coughs out more. His head spins, the evening sun stings on his skin. Pôpa still has him by the neck, holding his face just above the water.

"Are you listening, son?"

The Boy wants to answer, but all he manages is another cough. Pôpa presses his head back towards the water. A finger-length before the surface, the Boy manages a croak.

"What was that?"

"Yuz," the Boy coughs. "Yuz, Pôpa, I'm . . . I'm listening."

Pôpa yanks him up.

Never, the Boy thinks. *He'd never do this.*

He was a sad man, an angry man at times, but he loved him. All this . . . it just doesn't make any sense.

And yet it happened.

Pôpa stoops so their faces are level. His breath still smells like "rice drink," but now it makes the Boy nauseous.

"Now let me ask you a question, son. If Morala favors them who create their own fortune, then why are we here? Why do we eat the same shit every night, why was there no money to pay the medicus when you got that bad cough last year, why do we always have less than all them others? Don't you think I've *tried*? Don't you think I've tried to give you and Mâmah the life you deserve? Don't you think I worked until my fingers bled and my fucking back broke?" Briefly, his eyes glaze over and he looks away, but

they snap back a second later, now harder than before. “Yuz, son, I *have*. I have tried, over and over, but it just didn’t help! And do you want to know why?”

Not realizing Pôpa wants an actual answer, the Boy says nothing, just stares into this man’s eyes that look amber in the evening light. He doesn’t recognize them.

Pôpa slaps him across the face. Blood wells up in the Boy’s mouth as he bites down hard on his tongue. Stars dance before his eyes.

“Fucking answer the question! Do you know why?!”

“No!” the Boy manages. “Gods, no, I don’t!”

“Because we don’t all start with the same tools! Because this cunt of a Goddess did *not* make us all equal! Some are born smart, some are born dumb, some rich, some poor, some beautiful, some ugly, and if you’re born at the bottom, that’s where you’ll stay! Gods, son, *lobsters*? Are you really that stupid? We’re not like them! We’re not made for greatness! We’re too dumb, too poor, too ugly, and there’s nothing, absolutely *nothing*, we can do to make up for that. Trust me, I’ve tried! I’ve *fucking tried*!” His eyes sheen. Snot runs from his nose.

He lets go. The Boy sinks down against the side of the barrel like a wet cloth.

Something flickers across Pôpa’s face, and suddenly, he’s Pôpa again, the man the Boy loves and looks up to despite his bad temper and sadness. Pôpa stares at his hands. Water drips from his callused fingers. He opens his mouth as if to say something, as if to apologize, to tell the Boy he’s sorry, to hug him, to go back inside and play a round of Vuua with him, but then he doesn’t.

When he speaks again, he says, “There’s a place for people like us, son. Always remember that. Sometimes you just have to accept the hand life dealt you.”

And he leaves.

This night, he hears Mâmah and Pôpa argue as he lies on his hay bed in the cramped sleeping room he shares with them. They do that often, but usually their fights are short and explosive and end with Mâmah falling into line, but not this time. It goes on and on.

Until something shatters. And the door slams shut.

For several minutes, he can hear Mâmah sob from behind the bamboo screens that serve as walls. Then she stops, and suddenly, she's by his bedroll.

"We're leaving," she says. Her right eye is swollen. There's a gash on her lip.

The Boy doesn't argue. Once they're past the village, he asks, "What about Pôpa?"

There's a long silence, so long the Boy is surprised when Mâmah finally answers.

"We're better off without him."

Chapter 2

Scythe

THE ATTACK CAME fast and without mercy.

Before Jespar even realized what was happening, the bearers had already dropped the palanquin. It crashed down on the flagstone. Jespar managed to steady himself, but the Counselor fell over forwards and hit his head hard on the edge of Jespar's bench. Outside, there was another scream and the sounds of swords being drawn.

An ambush, Jespar thought as his mind finally caught up with the events.

Then: *Fuck.*

He snapped out of his stupor, stood, and yanked the door open.

They were on some kind of town square, framed by palm trees and flowerbeds, surrounded by villas. A fountain flaunted in its center, crowned by a statue of a bearded man wearing a horned crown. The sun set behind the greened rooftops.

Whatever was happening had reduced the escort to a confused mess. While two of the palanquin bearers were nowhere to be seen, the other two cowered behind the fountain, arms clasped around their chest and trembling all over.

"Outlander!"

Sergeant Mâadira. Like the other guards, she had her shield raised, but seemed uncertain which side to cover. A guard lay motionless at her feet, a bolt sticking out between the slit of her visor. Another was in front of the palanquin, still alive and clutching at the tiny twig sticking from his throat. For some reason, he didn't scream. He just muttered, blood welling up from between his lips.

"Outlander!" Mâadira shouted again. "Get b—"

Wood exploded.

The bolt had hit the doorjamb only finger-lengths from where Jespar stood, the fletching still quivering from the impact. For a heartbeat, the shock rooted him to the spot. Then he leaped out of the palanquin and ran for cover behind the fountain. While one of the bearers hiding there looked at Jespar almost pleadingly, the other one kept staring up ahead, his body pressed against the basin stone as if he could meld with it if only he tried hard enough.

Mâadira cursed. "Formation! Now!"

Finally, the confusion broke. Within seconds, the remaining guards formed a crescent around the palanquin, crouching and their shields raised slightly tilted above their heads like protective awnings. The next bolt came flying, aimed at a young man who, for some reason, wasn't wearing a helmet. It ricocheted off the nuvium with such force that it bounced back several arm-lengths.

Crossbows, Jespar realized.

And they're good.

As if to confirm his thought, another bolt struck. Despite the formation, it hit a guardswoman right in the fold between arm and breast where neither armor nor shields protect. She cried out and almost dropped the shield, but the adjacent guard managed to steady her in time.

No. Not just good.

They were exceptional. Five bolts, and three of them had hit home with scalpel-like precision. That the one aimed at Jespar hadn't pierced his skull had been nothing but a fluke. His chest tightened. He drew a deep breath and tried to calm the panic threatening to take over. As a young mercenary, he had thought the fear got better the more fights you fought. It didn't.

Gripping the hilts of his daggers, he peeked over the rim of the basin. In formation and hidden behind their nuvium shields, they seemed safe enough, but equally helpless, like a tortoise flipped onto its back.

"Outlander!"

Mâadira. She was glaring at him from between her visor. When their eyes met, she nodded her chin at a villa on the northern side of the square. At first, Jespar saw nothing. Then he recognized a figure hidden behind curtains of hanging ivy on the building's balcony. He held a big crossbow tucked between his knees, turning a little crank on its bridge.

Something cut through the air and missed Jespar by finger-lengths. Jespar immediately dropped back behind the basin.

Close. Too godsdamned close.

Blood throbbed in his temples; his heart hammered against the inside of his chest. He drew another breath to calm himself.

Two marksmen, he thought. One on the balcony, the other one, judging by the direction of the bolt, somewhere to the western side of the square. With his heart still racing, Jespar forced himself to take another look, tracing the supposed trajectory of the shot. This time, it was the marksman herself who gave her location away. She sneezed. Immediately, Jespar looked at where he thought the sound had come from. Another villa, this one three storeys high. He ran his eyes up and down the façade. At last, he spotted a silhouette behind a window. The shadows partially obscured her, but there was no mistaking the weapon whose tip rested on the windowsill.

Two assassins—one north, one west.

What now?

They could wait it out.

"Bad idea," Jespar mumbled. The ambush had been going on for several minutes, and not a soul had come to the square since then. Why?

The feast.

Of course. What better time for an assassination attempt than while most residents were getting drunk and the guards were busy acting as their chaperones? *No.* They couldn't count on help, and as much as patience was a virtue, its effectiveness against crossbow fire was debatable, leaving only one option: a counterattack.

They had to neutralize the marksmen, then deal with the other assassins who were undoubtedly waiting in some house or alley to come charging and finish the job once the escort was weakened enough.

Jespar glanced at Sergeant Mâadira. She had also noticed the second marksman and had exchanged her scimitar for a pistol crossbow while her left hand held the shield in position. However, she seemed to be the only one in possession of a ranged weapon; the other guards still clutched their scimitars.

The markswoman from the western building loosed another shot. The bolt bounced off Mâadira's shield, not leaving as much as a dent. Mâadira turned her face at Jespar, her eyes a silent question. Jespar nodded in the direction the bolt had just come from. Then, he drew his two throwing knives, one from the sheath sewn to his right boot, the other from his belt. He shut his eyes. Steadied his breath.

A window.

All he needed was a window.

Fate or chance, it came the moment he opened his eyes again. Just as the assassin on the balcony had finished winding up his crossbow and prepared another shot, a woman in a purple dress appeared in the opening of the southern alley. When she noticed the chaos, she froze.

The marksman raised the crossbow and aimed at the escort.

The woman screamed.

It was only a second of hesitation on the assassin's end, but that was all Jespar needed. Sending a prayer to chance that the other one hadn't finished reloading, he leapt to his feet, aimed, and hurled his knife. It cut through the air, made a full spin, and hit the marksman clean in the chest...

Hilt first.

Shit.

For a breath, the assassin seemed unable to move. He touched the point where the knife had hit, mouth agape in a way Jespar might have found comical had his life not been at stake. Then, his eyes snapped to Jespar, and the tip of the crossbow along with them.

The shot never came. Instead, the marksman collapsed, a black dart sticking from his neck.

Multiple things happened at once: The woman in the alley awoke from her stupor, whirled around, and ran. A scream came from the western building, followed shortly by a shot aimed at Mâadira, whose pistol crossbow had fired the dart that had saved Jespar's life. Lacking the cover of her shield, the crossbow bolt hit her in the shoulder. Without thinking, Jespar spun ninety degrees and flung his second throwing knife towards the second assassin.

Jespar was a good shot.

Good, but not masterful—which was why, given the rules of probability, the angle, and the distance, his throw should have missed by arm-lengths. Since Jespar also believed omnipotent deities had better things to do than correcting the course of badly aimed throwing knives, the only explanation for why this one hit nonetheless was simple: he had a shit-ton of luck.

With uncanny precision, the knife sank into the markswoman's right eye. There was not even a scream. She simply dropped her crossbow and collapsed like a puppet rid of its strings.

It worked.

A breath passed.

It actually worked.

Three.

Slowly, Jespar turned his head. The palanquin was still there, as were the remaining guards. Some of them stared at Jespar with expressions of confusion or disbelief. Mâadira was back behind her shield, her free hand pressed against her injured shoulder. Blood poured through the turquoise nuvium plates.

There was no time to congratulate themselves. Just when Jespar finally realized his throw had not just been some battle fervor-induced illusion, he noticed something odd about the helmet-less guard with the young face. Like all the others, he looked at Jespar,

but something about him was. . . off. When Jespar realized what it was, his throat tightened.

The guard was changing.

It was the only word his mind offered. Bit by bit, the guard's limbs transformed, shrunk, while his joints swelled and became more pronounced. The guard himself seemed unaware of it, at least until one of his comrades said something. He raised his gloved hand so it was level with his face. Its bones morphed and cracked under the leather.

He dropped his shield and began to wail.

Petrified, Jespar watched the man scream and kick and flail as if his clothes had caught fire, and only after the transformation had gone on for a number of seconds did he grasp what was happening.

The guard was aging.

Minutes ago, he had been at the cusp of his prime. Now he was an old man. Within heartbeats, his hair parched and fell out in strands; his skin thinned and stretched tight over his skull; his bones grew sharp and gnarled. No one in the escort reacted. They all simply stood there, watching their comrade wither away under their eyes. And when the guard went limp, Jespar became aware of the figures that had gathered in the mouth of the eastern alley.

The rest.

They wore civilians' clothes, but their weapons left no doubt as to their intentions. Assassins. Two of them stood out—a man and a woman, both tall, with skin and hair white as ivory. Their pointed ears marked them as Aeterna, and even though they were of different sexes, they looked alike to the point of mistaking one for the other. Twins. The woman held a staff, the man a double-bladed polearm.

It happened fast from there.

The female twin slammed the hilt of her staff into the ground and focused on Mâadira. A green glimmer appeared around her, flickering and distorting the air. Simultaneously, her brother raised his weapon.

He pointed it at the palanquin. "Kill the leeches."

The assassins charged.

Two went for Jespar, the others for the guards.

His instincts kicked in. Jespar drew his daggers, set his feet apart to steady himself. One of the attackers, a bald man with a bull's neck, had a two-handed saber, the other one, equally thickset but barely a man, a spear. *Bad*, Jespar thought. *This is bad.*

Using the momentum of his sprint, the Bull swung his scimitar in a wide arc. Jespar ducked it, feeling the steel cut through the air above his head with a force that would have taken his head clean off his shoulders. Before he could attempt a counterattack, the Young One rammed his spear at Jespar's chest. He parried the blow, diverting the thrust so it hit the flagstone. Uttering a curse, the Young One stumbled and tried to keep his balance. Jespar brought his right dagger up and drove it into the man's throat. There was a gasp. The spear dropped to the ground. Blood gushed, some of it spraying Jespar's face. Briefly, the young man remained on his feet. Then he collapsed.

Screaming, the Bull swung his scimitar again. Jespar dodged it and lunged forward with both daggers extended, but the Bull sidestepped him, then flung himself forward, shoving his entire weight into Jespar's side. A second later, they were on the flagstone, the Bull on top, his knees on Jespar's arms, his hands around his throat. Jespar struggled, tried to wrench free, but it was pointless. The man was just too heavy. "Fucking leech," the Bull said through clenched teeth. "You fucking leech!"

Panic took over. No longer did Jespar try to free his arms. He simply kicked and convulsed as his lungs grew hotter and hotter, his windpipe sealed shut. Tears ran down his cheeks. Sweat broke from every pore.

The man let go.

Jespar didn't think. Like a drowning man breaking through the surface, he gasped for air, then used all the strength he had left to tear his hand free from under the Bull's knee and drive his dagger towards the side of his neck. The steel hadn't even entered the Bull's flesh when he toppled over sideways.

For a moment, Jespar did nothing but wheeze and cough. Then, he pushed the man's convulsing body off of him and scrambled to his feet. One of the palanquin bearers stood

in front of him, his trembling hands holding the end of the spear the young assassin had dropped. Its tip was buried in the dying man's back. He had saved him.

They exchanged a glance, but neither of them spoke.

The mage, Jespar thought.

Behind them, swords clashed against shields as the assassins harried the escort with blows. The guards still kept formation, but if the attackers' tenacity didn't break it soon, whatever spell the woman was about to cast would.

No choice.

Both daggers drawn, Jespar ran for the Aeterna.

He had almost closed the distance when he realized she was not submerged in her magic to notice him, as he had supposed. She did see him coming, but she simply didn't care.

Something hit him.

It was as if he had run into an invisible fog—it flooded his lungs; froze his muscles; blurred his sight. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Aeterna flick him a disinterested glance.

He buckled. The world went dark.

***

When Jespar opened his eyes, he looked into the face of a woman. She was pretty—round face, rosy cheeks, chocolate hair. One of her hands was on Jespar's forehead, the other on his chest, and her eyes were half shut as if lost in some kind of trance. If this was the afterlife, he decided, he was happy.

She slapped him.

He jolted up. "What the—"

The woman opened her eyes. "Oh," she said. "You're awake. I'm sorry." It sounded genuine enough, but there was the trace of a smile on her lips.

"... I am now," Jespar said, rubbing his cheek. "What . . . what was that about?"

"A stimulus," she replied, as if that answered all questions. "How are you feeling?"

Jespar hesitated. “I don’t know. Woozy, I guess.”

The woman nodded. “That’s normal. You ran into a fairly powerful spell there, but it seems like your body fended off the worst of it.” She looked over her shoulder and her smile faltered. “Luckier than most. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

She stood, smoothed her orange robes, and made to leave.

Jespar got up. “Wait—what the hell happened? Did we—”

Fight them back, he had wanted to say, but a look at his surroundings gave him the answer. Yes—somehow, they had fought the assassins back. But at a price.

People crowded the square. Most of them were Blue Guards, but there were also civilians and a handful of priests dressed like the woman who had woken him. While the guards did their best to look stoic, the civilians talked, gestured, and scurried about, agitations written all over their faces. Jespar couldn’t blame them.

The place was a battlefield.

Corpses lay scattered around the palanquin, the pavement covered with blood. Mounted torches tinted the scene in an amber light, drawing flickering shadows across the bodies as priests and guards moved around them. Jespar’s eyes flicked to the spot where he had fought the Bull and the Young One. Both still lay there, the Bull’s face blood-smeared, the Young One’s eyes wide open as if staring at some horror descending from the sky. Jespar looked away.

“You should probably talk to the Counselor or the General,” the priestess said. With that, she left.

Jespar heeded her advice and went looking for Enkshi. At first, he had to pause after every couple of steps when his stomach would randomly lurch and his muscles go numb. By the time he found him, however, he almost felt normal again. His throat was still aching from when the assassin had choked him.

Enkshi sat on a bench facing the fountain. There was a bandage on his forehead, and he was talking to Sergeant Mâadira and another officer in a decorated uniform. When the decorated guard noticed Jespar’s approach, he frowned.

"No onlookers this close to the scene, *ma'sao*," he said. "Go back." He had cropped silver hair and a neatly shaved face that matched his perfectly pressed uniform.

"He's not an onlooker," Enkshi said. "That's the mercenary who saved us. Dal'Varek - I'm glad to see you well. I sent a healer to treat you."

"She did," Jespar said, passing Mâadira a nod. She returned it. A bandage covered the wound on her left shoulder, stained with dried blood.

"If that's the case," the decorated guard said and extended his hand, "Then may you prosper. I'm Major General Owe Duul - pleased to meet you."

They shook.

"They say you're quite the hero," the General said.

"Do they? I almost died."

Duul smiled wanly. "That's not the way the Sergeant tells it."

"Don't sell yourself short, Dal'Varek," Mâadira said. "If you hadn't neutralized that other marksman, we would have never kept up until the reinforcements came. None of us would be sitting here if it weren't for you."

For the first time, Jespar noticed Mâadira had a slight Kiléan working-class accent. It was subtle, probably because she tried to conceal it, yet it was there.

"Well," Jespar said, "glad to be of service then." He rubbed his throat. Over by the palanquin, the young priestess who had woken him now knelt over the corpse of the young guard the Aeterna's magic had targeted first. Only he wasn't young anymore, not even in death. The body lying between the palanquin's mahogany carrying poles looked like that of an elderly man who someone had forced into an oversized nuvium armor. Jespar's stomach contracted.

"So, we won, huh?"

"We did," Enkshi said. He sounded tired. "They almost had us when the patrol came. When they realized they were about to lose, they took to their heels."

"Just what you'd expect from this coinless scum," the General added. He spat, a breach in his otherwise impeccable appearance and demeanor.

"I see." Jespar crossed his arms. "So . . . do we know who they are and why they attacked us?"

Enkshi said, "Oh, *yuz*, we know. They were from the Scythe."

"Scythe," Jespar echoed.

"A bunch of terrorists. Those two albino Aeterna who coordinated the attack are their leaders." Frowning, he formed air quotes. "The White Twins—that's what they call themselves. Apparently, they think this is some kind of fairytale."

White Twins, Jespar thought. "They definitely knew what they were doing. One of them was a mage, right? A Sinistrope?"

"She is," General Duul said. "Before this 'White Twins' nonsense, they went by the names of Cara and Vyrias Zeevarin. Both were soldiers of the Jade Shell, the elite unit of the Blue Guard. Until, suddenly, they decided to break with everything we stand for, went underground, and started infecting people with their nonsense ideas."

"Hm." A mosquito landed on the side of Jespar's neck. He squatted it. "What ideas, exactly? If I may ask?"

Enkshi made a vague hand gesture. "Oh, the usual coinless *kazuum* nonsense," he said. "The system is unjust, the Coalition is evil, and the 'workers' should rule the country instead. Kilé has had its share of them over the centuries . . . they are like a wart that always comes back. But we'll deal with them." He paused, then added, "Soon."

Their eyes met for a moment, Jespar's unspoken question almost tangible between them: *And just who exactly are* we*?*

Enkshi dropped his gaze and studied his rings. "Either way, we should go. It's about time." He turned to the General. "See that the wounded guards get the best medici and the fallen ones a worthy burial. Their families each get three years' worth of their pay."

The General raised an eyebrow. "Three years?"

"My master will cover the expenses. Also, search the bodies of the dead terrorists and see if you can track down their families. If you do, lock them away."

"Understood. Do you want us to question them?"

"*Yuz*—find out when and where and how they joined the Scythe. There have to be nests in the city, and we need to find them. Ah, and General?"

"Counselor?"

"Gut their corpses and hang them from the walls. I want everyone to know what awaits those who join them."

***

They exchanged the palanquin for two horses and their fallen escort for sixteen new guards. Only Mâadira remained—as Jespar learned, she was personally responsible for Enkshi's and his employer's safety. When Jespar dared to once again ask who this employer was, Enkshi simply shook his head. "Soon."

They resumed their journey under the star-speckled sky.

As it turned out, Enkshi's newly discovered loquacity didn't last long. When Jespar tried to find out more about the attackers and the "White Twins," the Counselor's answers got shorter with every mile, until he was back to his tight-lipped silence. Jespar stopped trying. He didn't mind, anyway. He could use a break to think.

Run, a part of his mind said. *This is too dangerous.*

And do what? another part replied. *Wind up penniless in the most expensive city of the Civilized World, without any prospect or contacts?*

Better penniless than dead, was the first voice's answer. *This isn't worth it.*

Jespar scratched the rash. It had gotten worse with nightfall.

"Hypocrite," he muttered. Of course, he would stay—not for the money, not for the thrills, but because a mission meant a purpose, a purpose meant being busy, and being busy meant less time to think.

He didn't want to think.

The further up the mountain they went, the quieter it became. Areas of green broke up the spaces between the manors, growing larger and larger until the Jade District was but a sequence of villas in the rainforest, each surrounded by a humongous property and framed by high walls. Somehow, whenever one villa appeared at the end of a path

branching off of Fortune Road, it managed to look even more luxurious than the last. It was as though they'd entered another world, and only on the rare occasions when the canopy thinned out enough to allow Jespar a glimpse down the mountain did he remember he was still in the same city that housed the dirty, overcrowded streets he had sauntered through this very morning.

The same city that had almost killed him.

Eventually, they passed the first ziggurat, a ridiculously sprawling palace complex enthroned on a precipice jutting out of the mountain. Jespar's hunch had been right: Not only was his employer powerful, but he or she also sat on one of the seven thrones of the Coalition. But which one?

Each time they passed another ziggurat, he expected Sergeant Mâadira, who rode up front, to make a signal and direct the escort to its gates, but she didn't. They rode on and on, following Fortune Road's never-ending twists and turns, the chirping of the cicadas, the sound of the cool coastal wind rustling the leaves, and the horses' breaths their only company. After the fifth ziggurat, they crossed a bridge over a river spawned by a roaring waterfall not far away. After the sixth, a wide meadow.

They had almost reached the top of the mountain when, behind a steep slope, the road came to a stop before a towering stone wall. A portcullis sealed the entrance, backdropped by a large steel portal adorned with an embossing of Swords and the Scarab. In either direction, the wall stretched on for leagues.

Enkshi and Mâadira dismounted. The soldiers followed their example.

"Open!" the Sergeant shouted.

A man appeared atop the zig-zag parapet and briefly studied the arrivals.

"Open!" he shouted to someone behind the wall. Feet shuffled, a crank groaned, chains rattled. The portcullis rose while the Scarab on the gate split at its center and the door slowly opened.

From the first manors of the Jade District to the ziggurats of the Magnates, every structure, every road and every garden in the higher parts of the city had been part of a race for extravagance. Ever since they had passed the first ziggurat, the size and splendor

of the buildings had become so detached from the reality Jespar knew that at one point he had started to absorb his surroundings with the numb awe of a man reacting to colors he hadn't known existed.

And yet the sight of the First Ziggurat left him speechless.

Beyond the gate, at the end of a long avenue lined by palms and rhododendrons, stood a giant pyramid. Cut from white stone that glowed like alabaster, it towered high into the sky, at least two dozen tiers that, altogether, amounted to the size of two temples. Strips of lapis lazuli tiles adorned with golden mosaics accented the walls, galleries, colonnades, and gardens framed the platforms. A statue of a bearded man wearing a horned crown enthroned atop the ziggurat's peak, arms raised like a god basking in prayer.

"Welcome to the ziggurat of Jaaros Ismiraael Oonai," Enkshi said. "First Magnate of the Blue Islands Coalition, Chosen of Morala, and the most powerful man of the Archipelago. Your employer."

Chapter 3

Uunil-Yâr's Slumber

There was silence in the antechamber. Not the sleepy silence of a walk at night; not the dreamy silence of an opium den—the ziggurat's walls simply blocked out all the noise from the outside. Even the two guards left and right of the portal stood as still as statues, and, as Jespar's previous attempts to strike up a conversation had proved, they were as loquacious.

Jespar sighed. He ruffled his hair, and, for the fifth time ever since Enkshi had left him here, let his eyes wander over his surroundings.

As would be expected, the hall was wide and high enough to house another building. Two rows of square pillars supported the ceilings, benches, and planters ran along the walls. A blue carpet extended all the way from the portal to the far end of the hall, at which towered another statue of the man with the horned crown—who was, as Jespar had learned, none other than the First Magnate himself, Jaaros Ismiraael Oonai. If the man had a thing for dramatic pacing, Jespar concluded, this place certainly provided the perfect location.

Jespar stifled a yawn and scratched his rash. Since he'd first noticed it this morning, it had spread up to the base of his neck, and the itch had gotten worse with every passing hour. *No more sleepovers in brothels,* he resolved. At least not cheap ones. He decided to see a medicus tomorrow.

He was just about to stand and stretch his legs a little when Counselor Enkshi at last emerged from a hallway on the left side of the hall. He had traded his dirty sapphire robe for a crimson one. At the same time, the entrance swung open and an old man appeared. Weather-beaten skin and an eyepatch contrasted his pressed clothes, his trimmed white beard, and his neatly combed-back hair. Despite his age—Jespar guessed he was at least

sixty winters—his posture and gait could have rivaled any twenty-year-old. Upon spotting Enkshi, the old man bowed deeply.

"Ma'sao Enkshi. May you prosper."

Enkshi's eyes crinkled. "Agaam. How have you been?"

"As well as can be expected under the circumstances, *ma'sao*. Thank you for asking." He turned to Jespar. "Ma'sao Dal'Varek, I assume?"

"Yes."

He bowed again. "Then I am honored to meet you. I am Xeelo Agaam, head servant of Master and Ma'saa Oonai, and I kindly welcome you to this humble abode."

As humble as relieving yourself on a golden toilet in the middle of a slum, Jespar thought. He nodded and smiled, pretending to even remotely understand why he was being treated like a noble.

"Is she ready to see us?" Enkshi asked.

"She is."

The old servant showed them outside, where they began ascending the monumental, straight stair that ran from the ziggurat's base to its summit. Throughout the climb, two Blue Guards stuck to Jespar's heels like shepherds driving a sheep. With every step, the breeze got colder, until goosebumps formed on Jespar's arms and neck. On each tier they passed, he spotted at least a handful of Blue Guards patrolling up and down the colonnades and pathways, disappearing in and emerging from the doors and portals that led inside the massive palace complex. As sprawling and sumptuous the First Magnate's property was, privacy apparently wasn't one of its perks. Jespar wondered how many guards in total the ziggurat housed and how much money their pay and room and board alone must have required each week. Probably enough to buy the "divine bathing house" in the Steel District and its personnel along with it.

At half the ziggurat's height—probably the thirteenth or fourteenth tier, Jespar hadn't counted—Agaam left the stairs to the right, onto a colonnade that extended along the platform's edge. After a while, it branched off into a secluded garden. They'd been going for at least fifteen minutes now. They followed a gravel path lined by junipers, many-

colored rhododendrons, and palms for a while, until the old servant finally stopped in front of a small, white stone house. Surrounded by green—there was even a little creek—Jespar almost forgot that they were still on the ziggurat and not in some fairy tale tropical forest. Wind rustled the fronds and leaves. Insects chirped.

Agaam told the two guards that had been following them to wait farther back. They hesitated briefly then withdrew into the garden. The old servant was about to open the door of the house, but Enkshi raised a hand. “Wait.”

They halted.

“Two more things, Dal’Varek. First, Ma’saa Oonai, who you’re about to meet, doesn’t yet know about the incident that took place in the Jade District. I’d prefer to keep it that way, at least for now.”

“The ambush,” Jespar said.

“Indeed. It... Let’s put it this way: It wouldn’t be beneficial to her current state of mind. Second, while you convinced me of your skills in combat, I am still skeptical as to how a simple mercenary like you is supposed to help us.”

Jespar nodded. *That makes two of us.*

“However,” he continued, “Ma’saa Oonai has a different view on the matter, for reasons she has not yet revealed to me. Now, all I ask of you is...” He paused as if looking for the right words. Finally, he sighed and ran a hand over his bald head. “Well, frankly, I don’t know what I ask of you. Probably to be aware that Ma’saa Oonai has been through a lot lately. Just... try not to be yet another disappointment. Can you promise me that?”

Briefly, Jespar’s ankles felt cold. An invisible weight formed on his neck, like a steel palm trying to press him down.

“I’ll do what I can.”

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The house’s interior turned out to be a study. A woman sat at a table that ran along its center, cluttered with books, scrolls, and odd devices. The ceiling was low and the walls

narrow, contrasting the sumptuous architecture of the rest of the ziggurat. Soft amber light reflected off the marble tiles, cast by two sconces on the side walls. There were more, but they weren't lit. The woman looked up.

Even well into her forties, there was no denying that Ma'saa Nayima Oonai was a beautiful woman. And yet, as Jespar watched her rise from her chair, he couldn't help but notice something odd about her. *No,* he thought. *Not odd.*

Unapproachable.

There was something in her appearance and demeanor that Jespar could only describe as ethereal, something that made him think of the painting of a saint, with all the good and bad that came with it. Noble, beautiful—distant, melancholic. She wore a purple dress and a variety of necklaces, rings, and bracelets. Slim gold chains adorned her black hair and connected to a tiara around her forehead. Deep, black-blue shadows underlined her eyes.

Captivated by her presence, Jespar took a while to realize she wasn't alone. A woman stood at the far end of the room, running her fingers along the top row of a bookshelf. When Enkshi, Agaam, and Jespar entered, she turned to them, but the shadows that filled the back of the study obscured her features.

"Ma'saa Oonai," Enkshi said, bowing. "Nayima."

"Zagash."

Before Enkshi could say anything else, Ma'saa Oonai had already stood up and approached them. She stopped only a step from Jespar.

"You're Jespar, aren't you? Jespar Dal'Varek?"

Jespar hesitated. "Yeah—Yes."

She took his hands and bowed deeply. Jespar tensed, half surprised, half confused. "You're here," Ma'saa Oonai said. "Thank Morala. You're finally here."

For a moment, no one said anything.

Enkshi cleared his throat. "You... are acquainted?"

"Not exactly," Ma'saa Oonai said. She lightly squeezed Jespar's hands, her palms warm and dry. "But I've seen him."

You have?

*"*In my vision."

Enkshi frowned. "I don't understand,"

The mistress of the house let go of Jespar's hands. "It's hard to explain." She returned to her chair. "I know you're not a man of the Gods, Zagash. You're loyal, *yuz*, and you're an invaluable friend to my husband and me, but, just like him, you never believed in what the eyes couldn't see. That's why I didn't tell you why I believe we need this man."

Enkshi crossed his arms behind his back. The old servant had stepped into a shadowy corner. "You think I would have disobeyed you?" Enkshi asked.

Ma'saa Oonai flicked her hand. Her bracelets clinked softly. "Probably not. Still, I couldn't take the risk."

A frown formed on Enkshi's face. He said nothing.

"Please, sit," Ma'saa Oonai said.

Jespar took the hardwood chair across her. Enkshi sat down next to him. The woman remained where she was.

"Five moons ago," Ma'saa Oonai began, "before all this started, I fell asleep during my nighttime prayer in the *raawa*." She turned her face to Enkshi. "Now, you know me, Zagash—this never happens to be, but that night, it did. One moment, I was wide awake; the next, I was asleep. And I had a dream." She paused, as if to prepare her words.

"In that dream, I lay in our bed and had just awoken. It was in the middle of the night, and Jaaros wasn't there, so I got up and went to look for him. Just when I had made it out of the sleeping chamber, I heard someone scream."

"Your husband?" Jespar asked.

"*Yuz*. But something about his voice sounded different. It was... muffled, you might say, and echoed, as if he were trapped at the bottom of a lake."

"At the bottom of a lake?" Enkshi asked.

Ma'saa Oonai nodded. "I know it sounds... strange, but it's the only way I can describe it. Either way, I began to follow the voice, looking for Jaaros in the entire ziggurat. Every hallway, every chamber, every garden. But it was pointless. No matter where I went, the screams stayed

the same, getting neither louder nor quieter, as if the voice only existed in my head. And, with every minute that passed, that fear I felt became stronger. But, then, it happened." She paused. Her eyes fixed on Jespar's. ""I went back to the grand stairs, and, there, I saw a man at the foot of the ziggurat. And he looked just like you."

Jespar blinked. "... Like me?"

"*Yuz*. Before I could approach him, however, the dream ended and I was back in the *raawa* seconds after you appeared. Of course, I initially brushed this off as just some peculiar nightmare, but then *it* happened, and I began to understand that there had been more to that dream than meets the eye. Not merely because of what happened to Jaaros in it, but also because I realized that the man at the bottom of the stairs was in fact a real person—a man by the name of Jespar Dal'Varek."

The woman in the back of the room shifted, crossed her arms and leaned against the shelf.

"Hold on," Jespar said, "How did you get from seeing someone who 'looked like me' to knowing it *was* me? I mean, there must be millions of people with a similar appearance."

"I'm wondering the same thing," Enkshi said.

Ma'saa Oonai laced her fingers. "In order to explain that, I should first tell you the conclusion I came to. I believe that this dream was a vision sent to me by Morala herself. And your appearance in it is her way of telling us that you're the only one who can help us."

After a long pause, Jespar said, "You think I'm a messenger of Morala."

Ma'saa Oonai smiled. "Maybe 'messenger' is a bit of an overstatement. No, Dal'Varek, I don't think you're a messenger of the Gods. But I do think Morala intended for us to meet in this trying time. Which also brings me back to your first question: I know it was you out of all people in the world because of your father. My fate was intertwined with his the same way it is now intertwined with yours now."

Suddenly, Jespar's throat felt dry and tight. He loosened his scarf. "Did you just say 'my father'?"

"Damean Dal'Varek, former High Judge of the Endralean Tribunal, *yuz*." She looked at Enkshi. "Zagash—you remember what happened before the Gods brought Jaaros and me together, don't you?"

"Of course, I do. The marriage."

"Marriage?" the woman at the bookshelf asked. Her voice was both smooth and husky, like fine leather coarsened by years of wear. There was no discernible accent in her Inâl, but there was a singsong quality in how she pronounced the syllables.

"Yuz." Ma'saa Oonai said. "That was twenty-seven years ago, just a year after you were born, and there was animosity between our country and yours. It was a silly affair, really—petty political quarrels between the Magnates and Enderal's Holy Order that spiraled out of control.

"What matters is that I ended up as a chess piece in that conflict. I was still a maid at that time, who had just turned sixteen. You probably don't know this, but I come from an old and respectable bloodline of the Archipelago, so that's why the Coalition, with the permission of my mother, decided to betroth me to an Endralean noble."

"An olive branch," Jespar said.

"Correct. The man was old and cruel, and, from the moment I met him, I wanted nothing more than to turn around and run. But I couldn't... it was my duty to my country, so I didn't have a choice."

She picked a fruit from a bowl on the table, round like a gooseberry but bright orange. Instead of eating it, she turned it around between thumb and index finger and studied it for a while as if it held the answer to an unasked question.

Then she put it on the table in front of her, looked at Jespar, and said, "To make a long story short: Your father saved me. He investigated that nobleman's past and revealed that his previous wife had killed herself after he severely abused and beat her for years. And though these things are not uncommon, he made an appeal to the Holy Order and argued that it was too dangerous to put me at such a risk, and that the consequences would be disastrous if anything were to happen to me."

"And he succeeded?" the woman at the bookshelf asked.

"*Yuz*. He convinced the Holy Order and the Blue Islands Coalition that there was another solution. And that's how the free trade agreement came into existence—a true olive branch from which both our countries still benefit to this day."

Enkshi arched his eyebrows. “You’re saying this man’s father is the reason for our free trade agreement?”

“I am, Zagash. I was allowed to return to Kilé and, only moons later, met Jaaros.”

Enkshi flicked Jespar a sidelong glance. Then he clicked his tongue and nodded, as if to congratulate Jespar on his father’s success. For an instant, Jespar felt the urge to leap up and tell Ma’saa Oonai that his father probably couldn’t have cared less about her life and her marriage, but had simply wanted to prove a point, to bask in his righteousness, which was all the emotion Damean Dal’Varek had ever been capable of. Jespar didn’t. Instead, he studied his fingernails and waited for the conversation to continue.

The woman stepped into the light. She was young, maybe Jespar’s age, slim and tall, and wore her chestnut hair tied back in a ponytail. A scar in the shape of a tree root ran down the entire left side of her face and into her collar. “Visions and an honorable father aside, I’m not entirely sure I understood what Ma’sao Del’Verriks’s qualifications are. From what I gathered, he’s a sell-sword, so how do you think he can help with your husband’s condition? No offense, Dal’Verrik. I’m just... curious.”

“We’ll come to that later,” Ma’saa Oonai said. “First, I need to know that you’ll help us. Call me superstitious, Dal’Varek, but I firmly believe there’s a reason you’re here. All that has happened... it’s a trial imposed upon me by the Gods, and you’re playing a part in it. The question is: Will you accept it? Will you help me pass this trial as the Gods intend you to? Because I know you’re the key—I simply do.”

Nonsense.

This is nonsense.

But lucrative nonsense at that. Dangerous, fair enough—a game with poison-coated cards where one bad draw could kill the player—but not only did he need the money, he doubted folding his hand was really an option. Ma’saa Oonai might accept it if he bailed out, but Counselor Zagash Enkshi? Ma’sao “*Gut-them-and-hang-them-from-the-walls?*” Unlikely.

I’ll do it, he thought.

For the money.

He was just about to speak when he noticed the expression on Ma'saa Oonai's face. Dignified. But pleading. Remembering the last time someone had looked at him this way, he dropped his gaze. The back of his eyes burned.

He thought: *Coward.*

He thought: *Failure.*

Jespar licked his lips. "All right. Tell us what happened."

***

"Light," Ma'saa Oonai said.

They were in the little vestibule preceding Jaaros and Ma'saa Oonai's sleeping chamber in the top tier of the ziggurat. Outside, the wind whipped against the walls.

Agaam, the old servant, nodded and disappeared into the darkness that stretched out before them. A moment later, two sconces lit up. Orange light poured into the room.

The first thing that came to Jespar's mind as he saw the chamber was that it lacked warmth. Not for a lack of luxury: Paintings adorned the walls, gold lined the pillars that rose in each corner, and a frieze embellished the stone wainscoting, depicting naked-breasted men hunting lions. Exquisite tables, vases, cabinets, and chairs filled the empty spaces. No, there was simply something bleak about it, an anonymity that made Jespar think of the courtrooms where his father had passed judgment.

They entered.

Only when they had almost crossed the room, Jespar noticed the man lying in the enormous canopy bed at the opposite side of the room, submerged in an abundance of pillows and blankets.

"Jaaros Ismiraael Oonai," Zagash said as they stopped at the foot of bed. "The First Magnate of Kilé."

Even though Jaaros Oonai was dressed in a plain blue sleeping robe and didn't wear the horned crown the statues depicted him with, Jespar understood at once why he was a man worshipped, envied, or hated by many. Power and influence didn't always reflect in

appearance—Jespar had lived long enough to know that. For the First Magnate, however, it did.

Oonai's face was clear-cut, with a wide forehead, a pronounced nose, and two slightly slanted eyes. His hair began in a widow's peak then went down to his shoulders, and his dense beard grew down his neck, plaited into five braids fixed by golden rings.

Even if Jespar hadn't already known that something was wrong with him, he would have noticed it by now. To the distant eye, it might have seemed as though Oonai was merely asleep—up close, one noticed the unsettling details. How still he was, for one. Immobile except for the subtle up-and-down movements of his chest. Or the sickly pallor of his skin.

Ma'saa Oonai eased herself down by the bedside and held her cupped hand to her husband's forehead. Closed her eyes. Drew a breath. When she opened them, she seemed to have aged.

She looked at the young woman with the scar. "I wasn't quite honest with you, Varroy. My husband isn't merely ill. He's cursed."

"What do you mean?" Varroy asked.

There was a long pause, then, "He doesn't wake up."

***

"His coma started two moons ago," Ma'saa Oonai said, "but the curse had started earlier than that. He just... changed. Everything about him."

"How?" Jespar asked.

"His personality. You see, Jaaros was always known for his... presence. When he laughed, people laughed with him. When he was angry, no one dared to speak, and no one could match his eloquence in the conclaves. But then, slowly, it began to wither. He became distant, cold, and spent hours in his study, doing nothing... and whenever I, or Zagash, asked why, he'd either change the subject or deny that anything was out of the ordinary."

Varroy arched her eyebrows. “And what makes you think that change of personality had a supernatural origin? Sounds like melancholia to me.”

“That was our first thought, of course. So we asked ourselves what could have caused it,” Ekshi said. “But we found nothing, and still can’t. It had been a relatively quiet year, the Golden Soil Decree aside... but that happened well after his ‘melancholia’ started. And as he would deny anything was happening at all, all we could do was stand by and watch.”

Varroy made a pensive noise. “What happened then?”

“Well,” Ma’saa Oonai said, “with every day that passed, his condition grew worse. The hours he spent alone in his study became days, and he lost all appetite. At night, he couldn’t sleep, so he started going on these long walks through the gardens instead, which he forbade us to join. It all came to a head when, one day, he ordered Agaam to call in a conference with the other six Magnates and Sergeant Mâadira to escort him down into the city.”

Jespar shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “A conference? What for?”

Ma’saa Oonai glanced at Enkshi. He hesitated. “The Golden Soil Decree. He wanted to revoke it.”

“You mentioned that before. What is that Decree?” Varroy asked.

Jespar answered. “An edict that the Coalition issued some weeks back. In essence, it put every strip of land in the Archipelago up for sale.”

“You mean...?”

“Every beach, every river, and every tree in the country can now be bought, yeah, and its owner can charge people if they want to use it. From what I’ve heard, it’s got the commoners up in arms.”

Enkshi waved his hand. “The commoners are always upset about something. All the decree does is tear down another legislative barrier standing in the way of progress and our country’s greatness.”

Also known as the old money’s interests.

Jespar shrugged. “All the same to me. But how come Oonai wanted to revoke it? Did he have second thoughts about it?”

Enkshi locked his hands behind his back. “He never explained his motives, but *yuz,* it seems to. And I know what you’re about to say next: that his wish to revoke the Decree and his melancholia are connected. Am I right?”

“It’s not that far off,” Jespar said.

“True enough. But as I told you—the Coalition issued the decree nine weeks ago, well after Jaaros’s melancholia started. Not to mention the fact that he had proposed it in the first place.”

“Then why *did* he try to revoke it?”

“Because of the curse,” Ma’saa Oonai said. “I told you—nothing he has done or said since his change began makes any sense. If he really had second thoughts about the decree, and there’s no rational reason he should have, he would have found a different way to revoke it—a plan, a strategy, persuasion, the tools he usually employed to realize an idea. But he didn’t. He didn’t even bathe before attending the conclave, didn’t comb his hair, just stormed into the Coalition Chamber and barked orders.”

Ma’saa Oonai paused. Shook her head. “No. The Jaaros I knew would have never acted this way. These were the actions of a man under some strange, malicious influence.”

There was a short silence.

“Okay,” Jespar said after a while. “So, the curse drove him to behave irrationally. And as the Golden Soil Decree is still in practice, I assume the other Magnates turned him down?”

“Of course they did,” Ma’saa Oonai said. “And that was when it all got truly dire. What little strength Jaaros had left simply left him. He didn’t even go on his nightly walks anymore, he’d simply lie in bed all day, staring at the ceiling. It was as though the man I was married to had just... disappeared, and all he’d left behind was this empty shell that looked and sounded like him but was really just—”she broke off—“a puppet.”

Enkshi put a hand on her shoulder. “Would you care for a drink, Nayima?”

Nayima nodded. Her eyes sheened, reflecting the flames in the sconces. Facing Jespar and Varroy, Enkshi asked, “You? Water or wine?”

“Water,” said Varroy.

“Wine,” said Jespar.

Enkshi gestured to Agaam, who once again stood in a half-dark corner next to the door. He left the antechamber.

“Do you want me to continue?” Enkshi asked Ma’saa Oonai.

“I’m fine,” she replied. “The strangest thing of all was that shortly before the coma happened, Jaaros seemed to be getting better—not much, but a little. We even walked through the orchard the day before, and he told me all about his plans for the coming weeks. And then, when he fell asleep that same night, he simply didn’t wake the morning after.”

Varroy raised an eyebrow. She was leaning against the wall by the bedside, one boot propped up against the frieze. She either didn’t notice or didn’t care. “Just like that?” he asked.

“*Yuz*, just like that,” Ma’saa Oonai said. “And he’s been this way ever since. We tried everything we could, but it was pointless—even the medici have absolutely no explanation for what has happened to him.”

“What did they say?” Varroy asked.

“Beneath the verbiage?” Enkshi said. “That they’ve never seen anything like it and are clueless. They did, however, notice something else, and that is also what first made us suspect that his affliction has a magical or supernatural origin.

“Whatever had caused the coma and, they suspected, his change of personality, had also altered the way Jaaros Oonai’s organs functioned. While the liquefied food and water the medici tried to feed him simply passed his kidneys and digestive tract unprocessed, at the same time he showed no signs of starvation or dehydration. No weight loss, no hair loss, no muscular atrophy.”

"That's impossible," Varroy said. She stood closer to the bed now, studying the First Magnate. Her arms were crossed but she leaned slightly forward, as if inspecting a strange, yet fascinating, animal.

"That's what the medici said, too," Enkshi replied. "And yet there was no denying it: The coma protected Oonai, locked him in a supernatural stasis that prevents his body from wasting away. At the same time, however, it drained him. May I show them, Nayima?"

Ma'saa Oonai nodded.

Enkshi knelt by the bedside, level with the First Magnate's head. With thumb and forefinger, he opened Jaaros Oonai's eyelids. "What do you see?"

What the hell?

A milky glaze covered Jaaros Oonai's eyes, like warm breath on a cold window. Tiny swirls of vapor danced from it, dissolved in the air a finger-length from the First Magnate's face. His irises were two faded brown orbs under a layer of white. Ma'saa Oonai sighed wearily. She averted her eyes.

Gingerly, Enkshi withdrew his fingers.

"Feel his forehead," he said to Varroy.

She did. Like her voice, her hands painted a contrast—slender fingers and delicate wrists, but deeply tanned skin covered with scabs. Her nails were trimmed short.

"... Stars burn me."

"What?" Jespar asked.

Varroy turned to look at him. "His skin is like ice."

"Exactly," Enkshi said. "And like his eyes, this cold is getting worse with every passing day. Along with the clouding of his eyes and the gradual decline in body temperature, Jaaros Oonai's heart beats slower and slower, and his breaths grow shallower."

Varroy put her hand on his chest, then on his wrists. Her frown deepened. "This doesn't make any sense. He shouldn't even be alive anymore."

"And yet he is," Ma'saa Oonai said. "Still. Probably not for much longer."

Enkshi put a hand on Nayima's shoulder. "We don't know—"

"We *do,* Zagash. If it goes on like this, and there's no rational reason it shouldn't, his heart will stop beating in a few weeks. There's no point in deluding ourselves."

An uncomfortable silence followed. It ended when the old servant returned with a tray of goblets, handed one to each of them, then withdrew back into his corner. They drank, the muffled wind outside the only sound in the expansive chamber. Though the wine was perhaps the best Jespar had ever tasted, he was unable to enjoy it. He glanced at the First Magnate. Cold crept up his ankles. When he glanced up, he noticed Varroy was studying him. She sat on a chair, one ankle on the opposite knee, elbow propped on the armrest, head resting in her palm. When their eyes met, she held Jespar's gaze for a moment then returned her attention to her drink.

Who are you?

Varroy broke the silence. "All right, let me summarize: Three moons ago, Ma'saa Oonai, your husband started acting peculiar, became inexplicably withdrawn and distant, as if 'something had poisoned his mind' and produced a change in his personality. About a moon later, just when it seemed like he was getting better, he fell into some kind of supernatural coma that, even though it stops him from starving, slowly eats him up from the inside. And you want me to heal him." She glanced at Jespar. "Us."

There was a brief pause before Ma'saa Oonai answered. *"Yuz."*

"But not by conventional means, right?" Varroy asked. "Don't get me wrong, I'm willing to take a look at him, but I doubt there's anything I could tell you that your medici haven't already."

"You're a priestess of the White Leaf. And the people in the slums say you perform miracles."

Interesting.

"There's nothing miraculous about my work," Varroy said. "I only help those who can't afford a healer otherwise, and they tend to be very outspoken in their gratitude."

Jespar joined in. “They don’t expect us to heal him through medicine or treatment. If they did, I wouldn’t be here, would I?” He looked at Enkshi, then at Ma’saa Oonai. “You have some kind of plan, and we’re the ones supposed to carry it out.”

Ma’saa Oonai didn’t reply. She drank the last of her wine, then put the goblet down on the bedside table, next to the horned crown. “You’re right, Dal’Varek—we do have a plan. We don’t believe that this curse came out of nowhere, but that someone inflicted it upon him—someone who wants to see Jaaros suffer and die, slowly and painfully. Your task is to find who it was, and, thus, how to heal my husband. It’s a shot in the dark, I know that, but we’re out of options.”

She focused on Varroy and said, “You are here because you’re a master of your craft, regardless of what you say. And this mission requires an able healer, one capable of thinking outside the box, unlike most of the medici here.”

Enkshi frowned almost imperceptibly at this, but said nothing.

“And you, Dal’Varek,” she continued, “you know why you’re here—because I believe you play a role in this. What connects the two of you is that you’re both outsiders. However, before we take this any farther, we should get the formalities out of the way. Zagash?”

Enkshi nodded, and produced two scrolls from the depths of his robes. He gave one to Jespar, the other to Varroy.

“Can you read and write?” he asked.

Both said yes.

To call the contracts generous would have been an understatement. They assured each of them ten thousand sêr upon success of the mission, enough to buy a small house on Enderal. Jespar read his thoroughly. When he didn’t find a catch, he signed it with a charcoal-tipped stylus. Enkshi did the same, then handed Varroy and Jespar duplicates for them to keep. *How civil,* Jespar thought. His contract with the Gallowmen had been sealed by Jespar and the captain spitting into their own hands and shaking, a practice he was in no hurry to introduce to the Archipelago.

Just when they were done, a medicus appeared in the chamber to check on the First Magnate's health. Ma'saa Oonai sent Varroy, Enkshi, and Jespar back down to the study, telling them she'd join shortly. Following the old servant's lead, they heeded her wish. Back in the study, there was more wine for Jespar and Enkshi, and more water for Varroy. After some moments of silence, the counselor adjusted the jeweled rings on his fingers.

"So, while we're waiting for Ma'saa Oonai, three more things you should know before we go into the details of your mission." He unfolded his index finger. "One: While the contract already binds you to silence, I will be extremely clear about this. From the moment you leave this building, you will not say a single word about your mission or my master's condition to anyone but the people directly involved. Do you understand?"

Both nodded.

"Good." He ticked off his middle finger. "Two: Even though you're essentially sell-swords, I want you to understand that this is about more than 'just' my master's health. When Ma'saa Oonai said that Master Oonai has enemies, she was unintentionally understating the severity of the matter. There are hundreds of people out there who want to see my master dead or suffer, and it wouldn't be the first time one of them decided to give fate a helping hand."

"The Scythe," Jespar said.

Varroy wrinkled her forehead. "Who?"

"A group of terrorists who attacked us on the way here," Enkshi said. "And, *yuz,* they are among his enemies. But they aren't the only ones I'm talking about... there are a least as many smiling sycophants in the Coalition who want to see him dead as there are pitchfork-wielding idiots. That brings me to my final point." Ring finger. "It's already been two moons since my master disappeared from the public eye due to the coma. People are already talking, friends and enemies alike. If they were to find out about his condition, or worse, if he were to die..."

"He'd leave a power void," Jespar said.

"Precisely," Enkshi said. "And as you might have figured out by now, the political situation in Kilé is far from stable at this moment. The Scythe, power-hungry nobles, plain commoners enraged by the decree... take your pick. If word gets out that the First Magnate is unable to act or is dead, one of those powder kegs is invariably going to explode. Worst case scenario, all of them at once. So, you see why it's extremely important that Oonai recovers. If it had been up to me, a group of Jade Shell soldiers would be on that 'plan' now, but Ma'saa Oonai insists that it has to be the two of you, so my hands are tied." He emptied the rest of his wine. "To speak plain Inâl: *Don't fuck this up.*"

For a while, no one spoke.

No pressure, Jespar thought.

Agaam walked over and offered refills. Jespar accepted.

No pressure.

He downed his wine.

"Why don't you revoke the decree?" Varroy said at last. "Wouldn't that at least take care of the common folk and those terrorists?"

Enkshi scoffed. "The Scythe doesn't care about the Golden Soil Decree; they're only using it to feed their agenda. Even if we were to revoke it tomorrow morning, they'd still be out there killing nobles and burning down trading posts. What they want is a new order."

"But they'd have a harder time recruiting followers willing to throw themselves into a hail of arrows for them."

"Maybe," Enkshi said. "But the Coalition isn't going to negotiate with terrorists, and an existing legislation can't be revoked until at least four of the Magnates approve. Which they won't." He frowned, shook his head. "Not to mention the fact that we're not going to sabotage our own country simply because a few coinless *kazuums* are too intellectually limited to see that the decree is actually good for them."

Varroy made an amused noise. "I can't believe you just said that."

"What?"

"That the Golden Soil Decree is good for them. Look, I may not be a wealthy merchant or, stars burn me, a noble, but if somebody were to tell me I have to bloody pay to take a dip in the ocean all of a sudden, you bet I'd tell them to shove their stupid decrees where the sun doesn't shine. And I'd have all the right to do so."

Enkshi studied Varroy, head tilted, one corner of his mouth twitching down. She held his gaze. Then the counselor surprised Jespar. He smiled. "You think like a pawn."

"What?"

"You heard me. I know people like you... you think you have it all figured out. You surround yourself with have-nots, so you naturally turn us into the enemy... the wealthy, the nobles, the oppressors. Tell me, Varroy, did you know that the First Magnate was *born* poor? That he had to eat roots and bugs as a child because there was never enough food?"

Varroy rolled her eyes. "And yet he worked his way up through tenacity and effort alone. Yeah, yeah, I know the bloody story."

"Tenacity and effort are only two parts of the mosaic. The third, and the most important, is a... how should I say? A *mentality*." He leaned back, hands folded across his stomach. "You see, if life has taught me anything, it's that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who see obstacles and those who see chances. The former complain and wallow in their supposed helplessness. The latter take a step back and observe their predicament from afar. And then, eventually, they come to realize that almost every obstacle also has a loophole they can use to their advantage. Like all successful people, Oonai belonged to the latter group."

"How so?" Jespar asked.

"By using his poverty as an advantage. Half of what it means to be a wealthy merchant in Kilé is succeeding in spite of the massive competition trying to shut you down. Knowing the chicanery, seeing through the intrigue, and bribing the right people takes up considerable amounts of money and time. Unless," raising his index finger, "people don't know you exist. By the time the elite realized that this young fisherman was actually a threat, Oonai had had enough time to sharpen his daggers. He knew them all by heart, all

their hopes, all their fears, all their dirty little secrets, and he played them like puppets. Ten years later, by the age of thirty-five, he had accumulated his first million and became the youngest Magnate in the Coalition. And why? Because he chose to see chances rather than obstacles." Enkshi nodded at the open door, where the moon fell on the dark green foliage. "Kilé is a free country. There's no limit to what you can achieve, and my master is the living proof of it. Of course, however, the overwhelming majority of people refuse to see it that way, especially those who failed. So instead of changing the way they are, they grab the pitchforks and scream, 'Injustice!' at those they blame for their own weakness. And, you know, it's not like I can't understand them. Surrendering to your fate is easier than creating your own." He paused. "The Golden Soil Decree is no different. The whingers complain, the cunning scrap together their savings and buy a pond a little farther out of the city that hasn't been sold yet. Then they spread the word and charge just three sêr less than the competition—and, oh, marvel, you have a merchant. Opportunities... not obstacles."

Varroy's eyes didn't leave his. "And what about you, Counselor Enkshi? According to my research, you were not born in the Stone District; rather, you were the son of a wealthy cloth trader from Qyra. Did you ever have to 'see chances,' or did your parents do that part for you?"

Enkshi's smile didn't fade. He pushed back his chair, pulled up the hem of his robe, and knocked his legs together.

Metal.

"To my wealthy, cloth-trading parents, I was mostly a cripple, and to the other children my age, I was a cripple, an outlander, *and* a coalman from Qyra. Not the best hand to start with, don't you think? First, I cursed the Light-Born for my misery, but then I realized they couldn't care less and turned to a Starling tinkerer instead. Now, I have my legs back, own the largest manufactory of prostheses in all Vyn, and am the counselor and closest friend of the most powerful man in all of Kilé."

There was a short pause. Just when Varroy seemed about to reply, she shrugged instead. "Well," she said. "It's not like I'm going to convince you anyway."

"No," Enkshi said. "Probably not."

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When Ma'saa Oonai joined them fifteen minutes of uncomfortable conversation later, she looked better. The fatigue was still visible, but something else had joined it: Resolve. She had tied her hair back into a tight knot and removed the jewelry.

"We have kept you in suspense long enough," she said, sitting down. "So, I'll come straight to the point. Do you know what a 'dreamwalker' is?"

A vague memory stirred at the bottom of Jespar's mind, a conversation he'd had with a sailor during the passage. "Isn't that some kind of... indigenous shaman?"

"Yuz," Ma'saa Oonai said. "They are shamans of the Makehu who possess the ability to traverse the world of dreams."

"'Traverse'?" Varroy said.

"To remain aware when they dream. Think of it this way: When we, as normal people, dream, we don't question the nature of our experience, do we? Until we wake up or until the dream ends, we think of the dream as reality, no matter how absurd it is. Dreamwalkers, on the other hand, don't experience that suspension of disbelief when they dream. Their minds stay completely lucid throughout their sleep, from the moment they're born."

"That's... fascinating," Varroy said.

And terrifying, Jespar thought, thinking about the courtroom. He unfastened his scarf. His throat felt tight.

"It is," Ma'saa Oonai said, "though the Makehu themselves consider it both a blessing and a curse. You have to understand that dreamwalkers *never* truly sleep: Their entire life is one continuous experience, a story that takes place on two different planes: dream and reality. They never rest, which makes them extremely susceptible to melancholia and madness."

She took a sip of her wine then signaled for Agaam to close the door. The wind had died down a little, but the tropical midnight cold was now in full bloom.

"However," she continued, "staying lucid during their dreams is only one of their abilities, and it's something even normal people can do with enough practice. Have you ever heard the story of the Childsnatcher?"

Jespar and Varroy shook their heads.

"It's an old Kiléan children's story about an ancient Makehu shaman who lives in a cave deep in the rainforest and found a way to extend his life by stealing the souls of children—Kiléan children, in particular. In order to do that, he waits until they fall asleep and then enters their dreams in the form of a kind old man who carries a red sack over his shoulder, from which he offers the most beautiful presents."

"I have a hunch where this is going," Jespar said.

Ma'saa Oonai nodded. "As soon as the child reaches out to receive its gift, the Childsnatcher grabs the child instead and shoves it into the sack—which is, in truth, a portal into a nightmare world constructed by the Childsnatcher where the child will suffer forever, along with the million other souls he has stolen."

"That's a pretty messed-up way of teaching children not to take presents from strangers," Jespar said, and Varroy gave him a faint smile.

"I agree. And most of the story is nonsense, as the dreamwalkers are healers, not killers. One part, however, *is* true. They do have the ability to enter other people's dreams and even force them into their own. According to the Makehu lore, that's how they did their healing—by entering other people's dreams and altering them. Apparently, a lot of diseases, especially those affecting the mind, could be cured this way. Grief, melancholia, trauma... everything."

"Hold on," Varroy said. "If all this is true, how come I've never heard about it? I'm a scholar."

"Probably, because the golden age of the dreamwalkers is long past... even during their height, in the days long before the colonization of Kilé, only one in a thousand people had the ability to dreamwalk, which is very little in a culture as small as the Makehu were back then. After the colonization, fewer and fewer children with the gift were born. Nowadays, there are not even a handful of dreamwalkers left, and their gift is only a

fraction of what the dreamwalkers of the old days could do. Nevertheless, I believe they are our chance to heal Jaaros."

Jespar blew air through his lips. "You're hoping a dreamwalker can help us understand the curse, don't you? By entering your husband's dreams."

"Correct, Jespar Dal'Varek, that is what I hope. You will find a dreamwalker, convince him to help us, and accompany him into the mind of my husband." Before Jespar or Varroy could reply, she raised a hand. "Trust me, I understand how mad all this must sound to you. But I told you before, and I'll tell you again: I *know* that someone did this to Jaaros, that someone cursed him and rotted his spirits, and the first step in healing him is to find out who this someone was. And I believe that information lies hidden somewhere inside my husband's mind. It *has* to."

With that, she took a scroll and smoothed it out on the table. It was a map. "Now, according to our sources, there are three dreamwalkers left on Kilè. One is too old and, another, we weren't able to find, but the third one, we did. She is a woman by the name of Takana, and you will travel to where she lives and convince her to help us."

They went over the details.

Takana lived on Yuva, the south-easternmost island of the Archipelago, that enjoyed the questionable reputation of being the haven of the destitute and the lawless.

"Once this conversation is over, and after you, Varroy, have examined my husband, Agaam will take the two of you back down into the city harbor and take you to Yuva by ship. It's a good six-hour journey, so you'll be there by the morrow and should be able to return the same day."

Varroy glanced at Agaam. "You're a sailor?"

The old servant smiled politely. "*Yuz, ma'saa.* In fact, my father was a ferryman, so I probably spent as much time sailing around the Archipelago as a child as I spent on the mainland."

"Huh. I see."

"You're in good hands," Ma'saa Oonai said. "Trust me. Agaam has served my husband for over twenty-five years, and has never let him down."

"Fair enough," Jespar said. "And what exactly are we supposed to tell this Takana when we find her? What if she doesn't want to come with us?"

"You're free to tell her everything—as soon as she has signed the agreement that binds her to silence. As for your second question," the counselor continued, rummaging through his pockets and procuring a sachet, "this should do the trick."

He tossed it over. Jespar caught it and looked inside. It contained a small stone that glittered in every color.

A skystone.

I'll be damned.

"That's... this is worth a fortune."

"One more reason to keep it close to you."

After all necessary arrangements had been made, Enkshi gave them each a purse with enough money to account for food and unexpected expenses. When Jespar bowed before Ma'saa Oonai, she again took Jespar by both his hands. "Heal him," she said. "Zagash doesn't believe me, but I know you're the only one who can. I simply do."

Jespar tried to offer a reassuring smile. He didn't know who he was trying to convince—her or himself.

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It was well past midnight and Jespar sat on a stone bench near the stables. Two soldiers stood near their horses, knapsacks with food and water strapped to the saddles. From the bench, Jespar had an excellent view of the island and the city that stretched out beneath the ziggurat, a million lights in an ocean of green. He tried to remember what it had been like to scurry through the crowded streets just this morning—the smells, the din, the ubiquitous pulse of life and motion—but he couldn't.

With a sigh, Jespar let his eyes wander up the pyramid behind him, over its countless terraces, stairways, arches, and doors. In the milky light of the moon, it more than ever seemed like the abode of a god.

A dying one, Jespar thought.

What had happened?

What kind of curse had caused the spirits of the Archipelago's most powerful man to "rot"?

What kind of curse had caused him to fall into eternal sleep?

And who had done it?

Enter his dreams, he thought, and a familiar cold settled in his stomach. In a way, he was an expert in nightmares, too. Maybe that was why Morala had "picked him" for the mission. He tried to smile at the absurdity of the thought, but his lips didn't move.

"Deep thinking? Or is that your normal face?"

Varroy had changed into a fresh set of clothes, leather pants and a dark brown tunic with woolen padding that went well with her eyes. A rod with a handle perpendicular to its length dangled from her belt.

Jespar smiled. This time it worked. "I'm a profound man. So, how did the examination go? Any miracle healings?"

With an absentminded smile, Varroy sat next to him. "Don't ask. Frankly, I have no bloody idea what to make of all this." She sighed, rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Crazy as it sounds, I actually think finding that dreamwalker is our best shot."

"Well, then dreamwalking it is." He nodded in the direction of the rod she wore at her belt. "Is that your magic healing wand?"

Varroy grinned. "Only for the knock-your-lights-out kind of healing. Actually, it's a baton, the traditional weapon of my order."

"Huh. The White Leaf, wasn't it? Never heard that name before. Where are you from?"

"Why don't you guess?"

"... That's a tough one. I can't place your accent."

"Try."

Jespar gave it some thought. "Nehrim?"

"No."

"Uhm... Arazeal?"

"Far off."

"Well, you're too light to be from Qyra."

"That's correct."

He raised his hands. "Fair lady, I surrender."

"What, already? All right," she said. "I'm from Melây."

Jespar furrowed his eyebrows. "Really? I never met a—"

Agaam interrupted him. Jespar hadn't seen him coming. "*Ma'saa, ma'sao*, I'm sorry to disturb you, but we're ready to set out."

"All right. We'll be with you in a moment," Varroy said.

The old servant nodded and walked back over to the horses.

"Mind if we continue this conversation later?" Varroy asked. "I could really do with a rest, but since we won't get that until we're on the boat, a bit of silence will have to do."

"Sure. There's just one more thing we have to do—I couldn't forgive myself if we didn't."

"Yeah? What's that?"

Jespar offered his hand. "We never got a proper introduction. I'm Jespar Dal'Varek—pleasure to meet you."

Varroy hesitated. An untrained observer might have attributed this to her exhaustion, but Jespar recognized it as the wariness of someone who couldn't afford to trust freely. Finally, she smiled and shook his hand.

"Varroy. Lysia Varroy."

Chapter 4

Understanding the Ocean

JESPAR'S INSOMNIA HAD STARTED a moon after the "tragic incident."

"It will get better," his foster father had promised. "With time."

When, after a year, it still hadn't, Jespar stopped desperately trying to fall asleep and began to use the nights differently instead. Some of them, he spent reading in the big library of that cavernous house that was supposed to be his new home. Other nights, he went for long walks. And, as much as he hated the reason, he did it, something about pacing down those empty, quiet alleys stayed with him even long after he left Enderal and dreamed of the Corpse for the first time.

What was it?

Hard to say. Maybe that haunting yet strangely beautiful feeling they gave him at times, the feeling that it was *just him* in those nights, as if some arcane anomaly had faded all those other people in all those other houses away the moment they had fallen asleep, leaving behind a skeleton world in which Jespar was the only one left alive. A boy walking at the bottom of an ocean.

Had he been born in the Golden City, it would have been nothing of the like. "Uunil-Yâr never sleeps," the proverb went, but not before the one-eyed servant led him and Lysia down to the harbor had he realized how true it rang. To avoid unwanted attention, Sergeant Mâadira had decided against an escort to accompany them. Instead, they took a different, lengthier route through the jungle, which was why they didn't reach the lower city until well past midnight.

Still, it bustled with life.

People sat in front of their houses, gathered around fire bowls, drank, laughed, and talked over the sound of lyre melodies and drumbeats from inns and street musicians.

Some of the vendors still stood behind their stalls, and Jespar even spotted children playing on Fortune Road or dozing in their parents' laps. Exciting as it was, however, Jespar was relieved when they finally reached the harbor and the cool ocean breeze dried the sweat on their faces. He was dead tired. A scrawny man greeted Agaam at the pier, and a purse exchanged hands. Not much later, a small yawl glided over the waters of the archipelago.

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The lower deck contained just one cabin. There were only a few pieces of furniture, their tips almost scraping the low ceiling, and Agaam's lantern was the only source of light. Two cots that reminded Jespar of coffins were set in either side wall. The old servant placed his lantern on a table beside the door and adjusted his eyepatch.

"I will handle the sailing. You two should rest."

With that, he went out, leaving Jespar and Lysia alone in the cabin. Lysia walked over to her cot—that was, the one she had silently declared her own—stripped off her jacket, boots, and belt, and slumped down on the mattress with a sigh, lacing her fingers under her head.

"Speak tomorrow," she said, and she closed her eyes.

"You're not afraid I'm going to steal your stuff?"

Lysia didn't open her eyes. "Where are you going to take it? Plus, I'm afraid there's not much to steal. Unless you're craving the lovely scent of garlic or gruntroot extract." Before Jespar could reply, she said, "Good night, Jespar Dal'Varek. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow, so let's try to catch some sleep." She rolled over on the side, her back facing Jespar.

"... Good night."

Jespar stifled a yawn and stretched his arms behind his back. Then he went to his own cot, got out of his boots, unbuckled and slipped off his gambeson, and pulled off his shirt.

He was about to toss it onto the stool at the foot of his bed when he hesitated. He cast a glance in Lysia's direction. Put it back on.

Suppressing another yawn, he trod over to Agaam's lantern, counterbalancing the slight sway of the ship.

"Wait," Lysia said when he opened the latch to put out the flame.

"Huh?"

"Can you… Can you leave it on?"

"Why? Afraid of the dark?"

She didn't return his smile. "Please."

Jespar shrugged. "Okay. Sure."

He closed the latch and went to bed. A queasy feeling settled in his stomach, as it always did when he was about to go to sleep, not knowing what would follow: long hours of staring at the ceiling, nightmares, or, on increasingly rarer occasions, rest. He closed his eyes.

Images.

The attack on the palanquin, the air stirring when the crossbow bolt passed right over his head, the Bull's scream when Jespar had killed him, blood spraying over his face.

He opened his eyes and rolled over on his other side. He tried again.

More images, dancing across the dark of his eyelids.

This is a trial, and you play a role in it.

The ziggurat. Nayima Oonai's dream. The white fog over the First Magnate's eyes. The horned crown on his nightstand, polished and cold, like a grave good.

Coward. Failure.

You're the one who can save him.

With a groan, he shifted onto his back. His tunic got stuck under his flank as he moved, causing the coarse fabric to chafe against his rash. It answered with an explosive itch.

"Fucking—"

Suppressing the rest of the curse, he sat up and scratched between his shoulders. The muffled sound of rain pattering against the ship's hull and deck set in, first soft, then louder.

"Can't sleep?" Lysia asked.

Jespar stopped scratching. "Not really," he said. "But I'm used to it. Did I wake you?"

"No, don't worry," Lysia said. "I don't think I'm going to get much sleep tonight anyway. I thought I could, but my mind's in a whirlwind."

Jespar smiled wearily. "I can relate."

Silence.

"Can I ask you something?" Lysia said.

"Sure."

"Do you believe what that lady, Ma'saa Oonai, said? That Morala meant for your paths to cross?"

Jespar searched his mind for a witty remark but found only exhaustion. "No," he said. "No, I don't."

"Huh. Then what about that dream she had?"

"I have no idea. My guess is that she just saw some man that vaguely looked like me and subconsciously filled in the blanks in hindsight." He considered the thought, then nodded as if to confirm this to himself. "I mean, think about it: Twenty-eight years ago, my father pops into her life and saves her from a lifetime of misery. Now, her husband's in danger and not even the best healers of Kilé can help him."

"So, her mind creates another savior figure," Lysia said.

"Yeah. It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"I guess…"

For some breaths there was silence, as though Lysia decided whether or not to leave it at that. She didn't. Instead, she sat up on her cot, resting her back against the wall, the gloom accentuating the tree-root scar on her face. Or was it a scar? In the shadowy lighting, Jespar first noticed that the dark skin of the zigzag lines was only slightly raised and there was an almost purposeful symmetry to the pattern.

"So, tell me, Jespar Dal'Varek," Lysia said, "if divine messaging isn't your calling then what is? How did you end up as a mercenary?"

Jespar made an amused sound. "Right into the deep stuff, huh?"

"It's past midnight, we're on a boat, and it's pouring rain outside. If this isn't the time for profound conversation then when is?" She gave him a lopsided grin. "Plus, if we both can't sleep, we have to kill time somehow, don't we?"

"Fair point." He slid back to lean against the wall, propping his pillow—a sack with foul-smelling hay—between the wood and his back. His rash continued to burn, but he ignored it. "Though I'm afraid I have to disappoint you… my story isn't that spectacular. I left my country to travel, ran out of money, and started taking jobs. And since I can handle a sword, things just kind of went their own way from there."

How charmingly simplified, he thought.

"Okay, but why *did* you leave your country?"

Jespar smiled. "Guess."

"Um… You made enemies with the wrong people?"

"No."

"Someone tragically broke your heart?"

"Afraid not."

"You slept with the king's wife and now the entire country is after you?"

Jespar laughed. "Not really. To be honest, I don't think there's a particular reason I left." The lie felt shabby, so he decided to add some truth. "I suppose I just hate being in the same place for too long. It makes me feel… I don't know. Nervous."

"I see." Her lop-sided grin returned. "Commitment issues."

Jespar frowned in exaggerated indignation. "Oh, please… I'm very committed."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. In fact, I'm currently in a happy relationship with someone very special. She's always there if I need someone to talk to and brings me warmth and comfort in the lonely nights."

"Uh-huh? And who is the lucky lady?"

Jespar fished his leather gambeson from the bedside and rummaged through the pockets. “Here,” he said, holding up his nightflower pipe.

They laughed. It felt good, genuine, the laugh of two people who don’t know each other that well but want to. He went through his pockets again and produced a satchel. The rain had picked up. “Do you want to try?”

“What’s that? Tobacco?”

“No, nightflower. They have the best stuff in these parts.”

“I’m not—I don’t know. I don’t usually do these… things.”

Water, Jespar remembered. *Not wine.* He shrugged. “Okay, sure, no problem. Do you mind if I light one, though?”

“That’s fine.”

Jespar had not even stuffed his pipe when an expression that was half-frown, half-smile crossed Lysia’s face. “Ah, you know what? I’m in. Just don’t make it too strong, it’s been ages.”

“Okay.”

Lysia got up and walked over to his cot. A pleasant shiver ran down his arms as she sat down just a finger-length from him. He continued to stuff his pipe, blending the crumpled, purple leaves of the nightflower with sugarmint. When he was done, he went to the lantern, lit the pipe, and sat back down. He handed the pipe to Lysia. “Ladies first.”

“How gallant.”

To his surprise, Lysia took a deep pull and held the smoke in for several seconds before exhaling. Violet swirls of smoke danced up to the ceiling, the cool scent of mint mingling with the sweet aroma of nightflower that always reminded Jespar of moss and vanilla.

With a long sigh, Lysia reclined against the wall. “This is good,” she said, half to herself, half to Jespar. “This is really good.”

She passed the pipe. The wood on the handle was warm—Jespar wondered whether it was from the smoldering leaves in the chamber or the tips of Lysia’s fingers. He pulled. It

was good, even better than what they'd served him in the *sa'nuu*—he'd gotten it when he'd left the drug tent to get some food while waiting for Enkshi earlier that day.

Today.

Had it really been less than twenty-four hours since he'd woken up in that brothel? It felt like weeks. Closing his eyes, he let the familiar warmth settle in his body and mind, driving away bad thoughts and bad memories. A smile settled on his lips.

"So," Jespar said, handing the pipe back to Lysia. "You're actually from Melây, huh? What's it like there? I've heard stories."

"Well," Lysia said after she'd taken another puff from the pipe, "it's a big mountain of ice with a couple of settlements on the shoreline. It never gets hotter than ten sparks, not even in summer, and, in winter, we get less than an hour of daylight."

"Gods… that sounds awful. No offense."

"None taken. I'm more of a tropical paradise person myself."

Upstairs, a gust swept over the deck. Planks creaked, wood moaned. Jespar's thoughts went out to the old servant, and whether he was doing all right steering the ship on his own, but the wind calmed.

"Then you must be feeling right at home here." There was a short silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable. "So, you're a light mage, did I hear that right?"

"A light mage and a medicus, as they call it in these parts. To be honest, I try to avoid the magic part whenever possible."

"Arcane fever, huh?" Jespar knew how magic worked, but he'd always had troubles wrapping his head around it: There was an ocean of realities, eventualities, next to ours, and people with the gift, arcanists, were simply able to perceive those realities and transfer elements from them into ours. A firewall? Flames from a reality where the spot you conjured it at was already burning. Healing? Evoking the reality in which the wound had never been inflicted. As there were indefinite eventualities, the possibilities were virtually endless—at least in theory. The truth was that seeing and interacting with other worlds was a strenuous process for the brain, and the consequences ranged from light fever to madness or aneurysms. What determined the power of a mage and how much of

another reality they could transfer into their own was ultimately their mental resilience, which was part training, part natural aptitude.

Lysia took another drag, then passed Jespar the pipe. “You’re well-informed.”

“I’ve worked with arcanists,” he said. “And you’re some kind of healer of the poor, aren’t you?

“That’s a bit of an overstatement. I’d say I’m just a traveling medicus who doesn’t think the weight of your purse should decide whether you live or die. So, yeah, I treat the poor, but not exclusively—those who can afford it, pay.”

“Very noble.”

“Not really. Those I do charge pay enough for me to live a pretty comfortable life, so it’s not like I’m some kind of selfless martyr or something. Again, I just think that nobody deserves to lose his legs over some silly infection that could be easily prevented with an antiseptic or a bit of light magic.”*And eerily modest at that.*

Who are you?

“Huh. And where did you learn all that? Ma’saa Oonai said you’re some kind of priestess, right?”

“*Former* priestess, but yeah… the Order of the White Leaf. Nuns devoted to Esara, the Light-Born of Melây, who have committed themselves to curing the world of all diseases.”

“Lofty goal,” Jespar said.

“It is,” Lysia replied. “And probably way less exciting in practice than it sounds. If you’re a Sister of the White Leaf, what you mostly do is pray, clean, tend to the herbal gardens, and transcribe a shit-load of dusty, old tomes. Especially as an initiate.”

Jespar pulled again and puffed out the smoke in little rings. The effects of the flower were now in full bloom. Everything felt light and soft, his body, the room, his mind. “I see. And how did you end up there? I mean, was it your choice to join the coven or your parents’?”

Lysia made a joyless noise. “My parents… in fact, they left me at the order’s doorstep when I was less than a year old. The sisters took me in and brought me up.”

"Oh. I'm… I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I mean, at least I had a roof over my head and something to eat, right? Not to mention that I also learned how to read, write, and heal, the latter of which I have quite a talent for as it turned out." She took the pipe from Jespar. The leaves had almost burned down. "Also, as tough as life in the cloister was, the nuns were doing good with their work. That can't be said about most religious orders."

"Then how come you left them?"

"Ah, several reasons." A strand of hair had come loose from Lysia's ponytail. The pipe in one hand, she brushed the strand of hair behind her ear with the other. "First, because, as noble as being a Sister of the White Leaf was, my idea of life wasn't toiling away in some lonely cloister in a snowy steppe. I want to help people, yeah, but that doesn't mean I want to get old in a ten square width-wide room and watch my lady parts grow rusty with neglect."

Jespar laughed.

"Second," Lysia continued, smiling faintly, "there was something about the philosophy of the coven that always bothered me. As if… I don't know how to put it, as if my sisters were only looking at a tiny part of a giant picture, and that this actually hindered their mission."

"I'm not sure I follow."

Lysia took a second long drag then exhaled slowly, turning her face to Jespar, the smoke framing her face. "It's hard to describe. As I told you, the nuns are good people and live by what they preach. They wanted to actually cure the world of suffering. It's their approach that's lacking. Sure, the older sisters can recite the entire *Encyclopedia of Ailments* by heart, they can name every single bone in your body, and their idea of romance is probably getting seduced on an operating table. But, as vast as their knowledge may be, it's at the same time limited. They never in their lives leave the confines of those thick cloister walls. Hell, they don't even go out to do their healing, but let people come to the monastery to get treated. You see what I'm getting at?"

"They live in their own world," Jespar said.

"Their own little reality that is completely detached from the outside world, yeah. And how are you supposed to bloody *heal the world* if you never go out to see it in the first place?"

Outside, the wind picked up slightly, sending a moan through the planks. The rain was now relentless, harrying the wood with needle-strike blows.

"I hear you," Jespar said. "You can't understand the ocean by just studying it. You have to learn how to swim."

Lysia made an amused noise. "How philosophical. But, yeah, that's exactly what I mean. To keep with the metaphor, all the sisters ever do is stand on the shore and stare at the waves. And that just wasn't for me, so I left. I just snuck out in the middle of the night, on my nineteenth name-day, made my way to the next port, went on the first ship that still took passengers, and haven't come back ever since."

Sounds familiar. "Huh. But, as you're still healing, you haven't broken with their goal, have you? To cure the world of all diseases?"

There was a short pause. "Well, let me put it this way…" Lysia finally said. "When I kick the bucket, I don't want to look back on my life and realize I was just another selfish ass who was only out for herself. And, since nature decided to give me magical talent and a healing hand, trying to at least do a little good until the curtain falls seems like a fair way to avoid that." She clicked her tongue, shook her head. "Stars burn me, that sounds theatrical, doesn't it?"

"Not really," Jespar said. "I admire your idealism." *Pity that the world rarely rewards idealists. And that some dumb prick will undo all the good you've done the first chance he gets.*

Lysia gave him a smile. For the first time since they met, it crinkled both her eyes. "Thank you. Legacy and purpose aside, it's not all selflessness and martyrdom. Another reason I left is because I simply want to enjoy life as long as I still can. I mean, who knows, maybe tomorrow another star decides to come crashing down like the one eight thousand years ago and turn us all into a bloody pulp. There's a Melâyan poem that sums

it up better than I ever could. ‘Live like an eagle, love like a madman, and dream like a god.’”

Jespar grinned. “Sounds exhausting.”

Lysia mimicked slapping him in the face. “You’re an idiot. Anyway, I think the pipe’s empty. Thanks for that, you were right—it *was* good stuff. Now, how about you let me take a look at that rash of yours?”

Jespar blinked. “My—How do you know that?”

“People usually don’t scratch themselves just for the joy of it, and you’ve been doing nothing else the entire trip down the mountain.”

“Oh. Well, it’s nothing, really… just something from the heat, I guess.” *Why did you say that?*

Lysia rolled her eyes. “Trust me, if this is what I think it is, it’ll only get worse if you leave it untreated. Now, take off that bloody shirt and let me look.”

Jespar hesitated briefly then sighed and stripped off his tunic. Lysia watched him, a trace of amusement in her eyes. It faded when he turned his back to her.

“Stars burn me.”

“It’s not that bad, really. It feels like it’s getting better.”

“And I’m the Empress of Old Aranath.” Shaking her head, she got up from the cot and walked over to hers.

“What are you doing?”

“Bear with me.” She opened and picked through her knapsack and returned with two tools: a pincer and some kind of spatula. Despite the nightflower in his blood, a queasy feeling settled in Jespar’s stomach.

“All right… let’s give those little buggers a taste of magic, shall we?” she said as she came back.

Jespar swallowed hard. “B-buggers?”

“Kiléan itchmites, yeah. They get under your skin, dig tunnels, and breed like rabbits. If you don’t put a stop to them, they continue until your skin looks like a shrunken mushroom.”

"Holy shit."

"Don't worry. It's easily curable with the right treatment. Which I, with your kindly permission, am about to perform." Lysia traced the outline of the rash with her spatula, the steel cold against Jespar's skin. "The Makehu and native Kiléans have developed some kind of defense mechanism against it, which allows their body to kill off the mites on their own. Of course, that doesn't prevent us outlanders from catching it." She tapped the flat side of the spatula against Jespar's left shoulder blade, where the rash was the worst. His skin felt as if it were coated with a mixture of spices and coals. "Do you know why they call these mites the 'pigskin itch'?"

Jespar cleared his throat. "Why?"

"Because usually only outlanders are dumb enough to sleep around the cheap fuck-shacks that serve as brooding nests for our little friends."

"I…" Jespar started but broke off. "I was drunk."

"And that's why you couldn't say no when she climbed on top of you, was it?"

Her and him, Jespar thought, but didn't say it. "A man has his needs." It sounded lame, and Jespar didn't feel much like joking, but, as always when he was uneasy, his lips were faster than his thoughts.

Lysia surprised him by laughing. "I like you, Jespar Dal'Varek," she said. "I like you. So, here's the deal: I'll get rid of the buggers for you, but as this will require a bit of magical trickery that will give me a fit of arcane fever in return, I want something in exchange. A… wish, you could say."

"What kind of wish?"

"I'll tell you when I'm done. And don't worry: 'reasonable' is my second name."

Jespar threw up his hands in mock desperation. "Fine, you wicked wench. You win."

"Good boy," Lysia said. "Now, close your eyes, will you? This will sting a bit."

What followed was the most painful minute of his life. At first, there was only a tickling as Lysia laid her left hand on the center of the rash. Then, liquid lightning shot through his body. Jespar screamed, flinched away, but Lysia held him in place with a hard grip. Scorching his skin wherever it went, the lightning current zigzagged down his

back and up his neck, forked off in all directions, stopping at certain points where it intensified into a white-hot nail of pain for a second, then continued along its way.

After an eternity, it was over.

Lysia let go, and Jespar slumped down into the cot, his breath coming in fits, his skin gleaming with sweat. Lysia stood from the bedside, disappeared from his sight, then reappeared in his cone of vision with a waterskin and a piece of cloth.

She uncorked the skin and held it to his lips. Jespar drank greedily. "Yeah, I lied," she said. "It hurts like a bitch, but I couldn't risk you chickening out… you would have probably passed them onto me and Oonai's entire ziggurat otherwise. Good thing the spell should have killed those on the bed sheets as well."

Jespar tried to reply, but all that came out was a croak. Lysia soaked a tip of the cloth with water and started dabbing the spots of Jespar's back that burned the worst. "You didn't feel it yet, but the mites were already all the way down to your hips and up to the base of your scalp. These little 'pops' you felt every now and then was my magic bursting them like grapes."

Too much information, Jespar thought.

"But... But I'm fine now, right?"

"You tell me. How does it feel? The rash?"

Jespar felt for it. The skin was between his shoulders was perfectly smooth—no rash, no blisters, no itch. "I... It's gone? But how... how did you do that?"

Lysia's eyes crinkled. "Secret of the trade."

She went back to her cot. Just as the pain had ebbed away, the rain had let up and was now once again down to a drizzle. His head slightly tilted and his right hand rested on a part of his shoulder where the skin still stung, Jespar watched her as she methodically put her tools, the cloth, and the waterskin back into her knapsack.

You like her too, he thought.

You do.

It was more than mere attraction. Of course, there was something about her rust-colored eyes, her soft, yet pronounced features, and—less sophisticated than that—her

butt that spoke to the primordial parts of his brain, but that was only a part of what constituted the way he felt. It was a sense of… yes, what?

Recognition.

Like meeting the motif of an oil portrait from the hallways of your childhood home.

"Thank you," he said as she walked back over. "Honestly, Lysia. Thank you."

Lysia settled back on the bedside. "It was either me or some overpriced quack. Now, about that favor…"

There was a prickle in Jespar's chest. Ordinarily, Jespar was all but shy, and, under different circumstances, this would have been the moment where he would have pulled some kind of joke or maybe, sensing the crackling between them, even made a direct move. Instead, he said, "Yeah?"

"I want another pipe. And double the petals."

Jespar looked perplexed, then cleared his throat. "Oh. Okay. Sure."

He prepared and lit another pipe, and all the while Lysia studied him with what seemed to be a mixture of amusement and curiosity. She got the first pull. She held the smoke in for several seconds then exhaled slowly.

Jespar said, "For someone who doesn't smoke usually, you're pretty—"

She kissed him.

Her lips were soft and warm and chipped from the sun, her kiss was demanding. When their mouths parted, tendrils of violet smoke rose between their faces.

You like her.

You d—

She kissed him again, this time deeper, more intense, their tongues circling and touching. Jespar pulled her onto him, hands on her waist, her scent—a mixture of leather, nightflower, and herbs—sending a prickle down into his stomach and groin.

When Lysia withdrew her face, her eyes were still half-closed and a grin flickered on the corners of her mouth. She shoved him down on his back and ran her finger around his neck and over the line of his clavicle. The rain had stopped completely, leaving only the

sounds of their breathing, the creaking wood, and the waves breaking against the hull of the ship.

"I've been meaning to do that for a while now," she said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. At least ten minutes."

Jespar grinned, tracing his hands up her waist then back down again to her hips. "Aren't there rules against that or something? Getting involved with your patients?"

Lysia clicked her tongue. "As long as no one gets hurt, and I feel comfortable, and like what I'm doing, who cares?"

"Fair point. So? Are you liking it?"

Lysia planted a kiss on his forehead. "It's better than expected."

"... Thanks."

Lysia laughed. "Oh, don't get me wrong, you're a good kisser. It's just… you're not the type of man I usually get involved with. Greying hair or not, your face is a little too boyish for my liking, that stuff on your cheeks barely qualifies as stubble. Also," she flicked a finger against Jespar's upper arm, "you could do with more muscle."

Jespar sighed. "You know how to make a girl feel special."

Lysia laughed again. It was good laugh, husky, genuine. "I'm sorry—people tell me I'm too direct sometimes. But, rest assured, I'm enjoying it. Otherwise, I wouldn't be sitting on top of you, would I?"

Instead of answering, Jespar pulled Lysia closer and tried to kiss her again. She resisted and put her index finger on his lips. "One more thing," she said. "What do you expect from this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we're on a mission together, and if that counselor is to be believed, a lot depends on it… so, we should probably, you know, map the road before we go any farther. What do you expect from this?"

Jespar gave it some thought. "No idea," he finally said. "You?"

"Fun."

"Really?"

"Really. Just a good time… And no need to worry about babies and the like—I took some bitterleaf last week, so I'm still on the safe side."

"You took… What for? For whom?"

Her eyes crinkled at the corners. "For someone. You know, considering that I just cured *you* from a whorehouse itch, you should go easy on the indignation, don't you think?"

Jespar said nothing. Lysia kissed him on the tip of his nose. "So, are we good? Just some fun, no strings attached?"

"Yeah… Yeah, we're good." He smiled, shook his head. "Some priestess you are, Lysia Varroy."

"I'm full of surprises. So, how about you, Jespar Dal'Varek?" Not taking her eyes from him, she ran her fingertips down his navel and under the loose waistband of his trousers. "Do *you* like it?"

He did.

He liked it when she took off her tunic, exposing the strange, marring, beautiful scar that reached all the way down to her right breast. He liked the way her toes curled as he ran his tongue over her most sensitive spot. He liked it when she sat on top of him, their bodies naked on the coarse fabric of the cot.

Slowly, she eased him inside her and began to move up and down, up and down, her fingers warm on Jespar's chest. His hips joined her rhythm, his hands first caressing then clutching hers. A prickle grew in Jespar's stomach and thighs, shivering heat, and Lysia broke into a soft moan. They rolled over so she was on her back and he over her, her legs locked around his waist, his arms around her back, both pulling each other closer and closer, until the warmth of their skin melded, and the thrusts grew faster and their breaths shorter, and the prickling heat in Jespar's groin became unbearable.

After it was over, they lay still for some minutes, Jespar's face buried in Lysia's neck, her hands laced around his.

Finally, she smiled. "Let's finish that pipe."

They talked, joked, laughed as they did. When the chamber was empty, they had sex again. By the time Jespar finally fell asleep, the first rays of early morning sun were already falling through the portholes.

Chapter 5

Yuva

THE FIRST THING JESPAR NOTICED when he awoke was that he'd had no nightmares. No Corpse. No trial. No knives cutting the skin off his body. The second: He was alone on his cot. He blinked to clear away the sleep and propped himself up on his elbow. Lysia sat on a stool across the room, legs crossed ankle on knee, and in her hands a book. Her eyes didn't move and there was something absentminded to her expression, as if she wasn't really reading.

"Hey," Jespar said.

Lysia's eyes darted up. "Oh, hey."

"Slept well?"

"Like a baby. I should smoke nightflower more often."

Jespar yawned. "Words of wisdom."

"How's the rash? Still gone?"

Jespar felt inward. "Yeah."

"Good. Sometimes a mite survives and then it starts all over. But seems we got them all last night."

Last night.

An uncomfortable silence ensued, as if both didn't know what the other expected them to say next.

No strings attached, Jespar thought.

He swung his legs over the side of his bed and sat. "Well then... let's see where we are, shall we?"

Something flickered across Lysia's face, as though she had hoped for a different answer. Then the left corner of her mouth curled up, forming that lop-sided smile of hers, and the tension was gone. She closed the book with a thud. "Sure. Lead the way."

Upstairs, they found Agaam doing repairs on the sail. Tiny puddles of water on the deck glistened in the morning sun, leftovers of last night's downpour. Agaam had rolled up the sleeves of his tunic all the way to his shoulders, exposing two arms so athletic they made Jespar wonder if the old servant participated in underground fights during his off-duty hours.

When Agaam noticed them, a faint smile flickered on his mouth. "Good morning, *ma'sae.* May you prosper."

Lysia averted her eyes. Jespar cleared his throat. "You too. Did you get through that storm all right?"

"I did, *ma'sao,* thank you for asking. Are you hungry?"

They were. Not much later, the three of them sat around a crate repurposed into a table, eating a mixture of rice, fried plantains, and dragonfruit, sipping black tea, and chatting. Though Lysia and Jespar were on the same side of the crate, she hadn't seated herself particularly close to Jespar, and nothing about the way she talked or looked at him hinted at what had happened last night—Jespar watched her, undecided how he should feel.

Lysia did most of the talking, asking Agaam questions ranging from the political situation in Uunil-Yâr to his service under Jaaros Oonai. As expected, Agaam answered politely but with reservation, and, after a while, Jespar's thoughts trailed off and he watched the play of the waves in the blue vastness around them instead.

As they finished eating, the wind settled and turned the sea still as smoothed paper. Another hour later, shortly before its zenith, the pleasant morning sun turned into an orb of heat baring down from the cloudless sky, so that Lysia and Jespar returned below deck, where they made casual conversation and prepared their equipment.

They reached Yuva at noon.

"A haven for the lawless and the destitute," Enkshi had called the easternmost island of the archipelago, and what Jespar saw when Agaam steered the yawl into the port of the

island's eponymous capital couldn't have been more fitting. Though only eight hours sea journey from Uunil-Yâr, Yuva seemed like a different world.

It was a floating city.

Even though patches of sand on the shoreline hinted at what the island must once have looked like, every bit of soil was covered with structures. A faint green mist hung over the island, dense on the ground, gossamer over the roofs. The buildings were run-down, the roofs made from dried palm fronds and the walls from woven reed or, on rare occasions, adobe. As exciting as this might have sounded in a traveler's notebook, it was depressing in reality. The dreariness and disrepair aside, the city lacked a concept—no Fortune Road marked the progression of wealth, no nobles' district contrasted the serpentine alleys of the outer city rings. Yuva was simply a motley of houses, cobbled together every which way, with zigzagging bridges and ramps connecting them. If Uunil-Yâr was Morala's daredevil lover, Yuva was their misshapen child, locked away in the attic so no one would see. No one seemed to care about their arrival—no inquisitive harbormaster, no forms to fill out. They'd simply picked the first free wharf and claimed it as their own.

While Agaam moored the yawl, Lysia adequately summed up Jespar's feelings. "Stars burn me. This place is a shithole."

"It's been through some hard times," Agaam said.

"I wouldn't have noticed," Lysia replied. She shielded her eyes against the sun and squinted into the distance. "What's that fog?"

"Nuvium dust," Agaam said. "Yuva has the biggest mine in the archipelago. Which is also why I advise you to get yourselves a mouthcloth for while you're here. Also, you should be careful—There aren't as many guards here as in the capital and Yuvanians aren't known for their fondness of folks from other islands, let alone outlanders, so keep your weapons ready, just in case. I'll be watching the yawl while you're gone—just come back here once you've found the dreamwalker and we can be on our way back to the capital."

Eager to leave, Jespar thought. He couldn't blame him. "Okay. Any idea where to start looking?"

Agaam finished towing the rope to the mooring post. He adjusted his eyepatch. "Try asking in a tavern."

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What Jespar noticed first as they walked down the dockside was that there were far more Makehu on Yuva than there had been on Uunil-Yâr. At the same time, ethnicities were harder to pinpoint, as many of the natives they saw wore the colorful clothes of the Kiléans instead of their traditional, reed-like garments, and a lot of their faces combined Makehu and Kiléan characteristics: bamboo-leaf eyes but dense facial hair, wiry but tall. But like most poor places Jespar had been to, their material deprivation didn't necessarily reflect in its inhabitants. He came across all kinds of emotions: anger, exhaustion, and defiance, but also pride, liveliness, and a kind of dignified calm—though the former three were undoubtedly more prevalent than the latter. In front of one of the few official-looking buildings, a woman had an argument with a Blue Guard that almost ended with her getting arrested when she dropped the word "Scythe"; twice Jespar overheard people mentioning the Golden Soil decree. What land was left on Yuva to buy, he couldn't fathom.

Most buildings on the harbor promenade seemed to be warehouses, so it took them a while to find an inn. By the time they came to a halt in front of an adobe house crammed between two ramshackle buildings, Jespar felt like a lobster in a cooking pot. Sunburn on his palms and neck underlined the simile. A sign depicting a kraken snapping a scarab in two hung above the tavern's open entrance. Wind and weather had worn away some of the establishment's name, leaving it to read "Kr-k-s Ar-s." Judging by the drawing, the first word used to be "Kraken's," the second probably "Arms"— though the smell wafting toward them from the inside left invited another interpretation.

"Looks like as good a place as any," Lysia said.

They went in. Surprisingly, the interior of the place was far less dreary than the facade suggested. Except for a group of sailors in a corner and a solitary figure at the bar, the place was empty. A scrawny innkeep with a beaver-like face greeted them; They bought first
drinks, then asked for information.

The innkeep made an amused noise. “There are at least three dozen Takanas on Yuva, and them are only the ones I know of. You’re gonna have to give me more than that.”

Lysia hesitated.

“She is some kind of shaman,” Jespar said. “Or used to be.”

The innkeep’s face clouded. “The crazy one?”

“I guess.”

“... Huh. *Yuz,* I know her. Most of the islandfolk are giving her a wide berth, though. What’s your business with her?”

Lysia rejoined the conversation. “Business.”

The innkeep frowned. “Fair enough. I’ll tell you where she lives, but it’ll cost you.”

A haggle later, Jespar’s coin pouch was fifty sêr lighter but they had the information they wanted. They finished their drinks and went back outside, headed for the Pit—the place where Takana, the last dreamwalker, apparently lived. Neither Jespar nor Lysia noticed the four figures following them.

***

As Yuva had no main road, Jespar and Lysia spent most of their time pushing their way through a crowded maze of rat-runs and alleys on the ground and a web of plank-ways and bridges on the rooftops, waving off the countless street merchants who offered them dubious goods, and holding on tight to their knapsacks and pouches. The city was cramped: Every bit of ground was developed, a battle for living space without regard for architectural rules and safety. A tower rose in the city center, adobe at the base, wood at the top, that looked as though the Yuvanians had just kept on adding stories against better knowledge, with oriels and windows protruding at the most bizarre angles. What seemed

to be an old town hall had been repurposed into a mass commune. A shack stood right in the middle of a street.

The deeper into Yuva they went, the more drastic the poverty and disrepair became. Waste littered the streets, children with bloated bellies sat by the roadside and sold shriveled, black clumps that were supposedly fruits. Men and women, skeletons in rags, wallowed in the shadows of the houses. Only every now and then did the ruins of a structure cut from the white stone they knew from the Golden City's noble districts poke through the shacks. Despite it all, however, Lysia and Jespar experienced little hostility, apart from the occasional distrustful glance or jostle in passing.

It was shortly after midday when Lysia told Jespar she needed a rest and that they should go look for a place where the air smelled just a touch less than what emanated from the orifices of a troll. Jespar argued that they should stay as close to the populated areas as possible, but Lysia insisted. With the sun sizzling on his skin and the green fog burning in his throat, he finally gave in, and they turned into the first alley that seemed to lead oceanward. After following it for quite a while, the maze of streets opened up to a patch of hardpan framed by the backsides of deserted shacks and vegetated with tangles of shrubs and ferns. Waste lay scattered in small heaps all over the clearing, and flies ate away at the remains of a dog in its center.

"This will do," Lysia said and made for one of the shacks whose walls cast an inviting shadow.

Jespar rubbed his throat. They had gone too far from the crowded areas for his liking. On the other hand, this was the first place where the air didn't sting in their lungs and make his sunburn singe like acid.

Lysia slumped down in the shadow of the shack and reclined against the wall. "Bloody fog... how does anyone stand it?"

Oh, to hell with it.

"I doubt anyone asks for their opinion," Jespar said and sat down beside her. Their legs touched slightly, and Lysia neither withdrew nor slid closer. "Probably not." She heaved

her rucksack on her lap, pulled out a wooden jar, and offered it to Jespar. “For the sunburn.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

It contained a white, pleasant-smelling salve that Jespar applied to his face, hands, and neck. The sting eased off almost immediately.

He returned the jar. “You’re a lifesaver.”

Lysia applied some to her own face. “How come Morala doesn’t tell her messengers that the sun over the Bygone Sea is a bitch?”

“Good question,” Jespar said. “I guess she just likes us all tanned and musky when we give our reports in her chambers.”

Lysia chuckled. “You’re an idiot.” She screwed on the lid of the jar, and put it back into her knapsack. Jespar unfastened his waterskin from his belt, drank deeply, then offered it to Lysia. She accepted.

“You know, I heard stories about this place,” she said after she finished drinking. “But I thought people were exaggerating. I don’t get it, really. I do, but then I don’t.”

Jespar took the flask and corked it up. “That doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“I mean that people who think like Enkshi and the First Magnate actually exist... people who know of this poverty, have the power and means to change it for the better, but don’t. It’s not news that the Light-Born don’t care, but the magnates? They are actual people.”

“Well,” Jespar said,” you heard Enkshi, didn’t you? They don’t help because they don’t consider it their responsibility—according to them, these have-nots brought their misery upon themselves, because they chose to see obstacles when others would have seen chances.”

Lysia made a joyless noise. “I don’t see an awful lot of chances up for grabs around here, do you? Come on, Enkshi is many things, but he’s not dumb, so he has to know that not everybody has the potential to strike it big. Stars, what about the feebleminded, or someone who, I don’t know, loses his entire property in a typhoon? People are different,

that's just how it is, and while some will be successful, others won't. The answer can't be to let those who don't rot to death in a hellhole."

"It seems to be working just fine." Jespar said. He tried patting the flimsy layer of green dust off his gambeson. In vain. "As long as the people play the game, the winners won't change it."

Lysia sighed, rubbed her temples with her thumbs. "Yeah, yeah, yeah... I know the story. People are selfish, the world doesn't care what you want, blah, blah, blah. At the risk of blowing your mind, you're not the first cynical sellsword to walk the face of Vyn. What I just don't understand is whether people are simply born selfish pricks or become this way... and if they do, how. Anyway, you still have our provisions, right? Because I'm starving."

Jespar took a bag of dates and two of the yellow gooseberries from his knapsack. They shared and ate in silence.

"You want to know what I think?" Jespar said after a while. "About that whole selfish thing, I mean?"

Lysia looked up. "Elucidate me."

"That it all boils down to perspective. All this... Yuva, the slums of Uunil-Yâr... it's so far away from the everyday reality of white palaces, power games, and money that the old money lives in that it has probably turned into little more than a theoretical concept to them." He ate another date, his fingers sticky from the juice. "They *know* this poverty exists, yeah, and they also *know* the Golden Soil Decree will make life a lot worse for a lot of people. But we only care as far as the eye can see, and usually only if something directly affects us... that's not necessarily malice, just human nature. Plus, we don't like to see ourselves as bad people, so we create our own worldview that justifies our actions. In Oonai's or Enkshi's case, that success is only a matter of working hard enough and that those who don't make it were just lazy. And, in a way, this view makes complete sense."

"Does it?"

"Of course," Jespar said. "As long as you accept 'each for their own' as a your basic premise."

Lysia spit out a date pit. "But that's a horseshit premise."

"Horseshit or not, it's the premise most people would probably adopt if they were in Oonai's or Enkshi's position—Hell, I don't even know if I'd be any different. You simply can't and shouldn't rely on mankind's empathy to save the day, because it won't anytime soon."

Lysia studied him, her expression blank. Then she took the waterskin and drank. "I think," she said, corking it up. "That you're wr—"

Four figures had emerged from one of the shacks, three men and a woman, and even before Jespar noticed the weapons at their belts, he knew they were trouble. His eyes darted across the square, looking for an escape route; the abandoned shack blocked the path behind them; to their left and right were at least twenty arm-lengths of open field. Even if the newcomers had no throwing knives, pistol crossbows, or slingshots, chances were they'd catch them—if not for their speed, then for Jespar's and Lysia's lack of knowledge of the area. He glanced at Lysia, who, judging by the way she clutched her baton, had come to the same conclusion. They got to their feet, not taking their eyes from the four Yuvanians, who came to a halt a few steps before them. The woman, a Makehu with a wild pattern of tattoos around her eyes that contrasted her otherwise almost fragile appearance, seized the word. A curved blade dangled at her side, the steel reflecting the sunlight.

"You know what comes next." Oddly enough, she had no accent, neither Kilèan nor Makehu, which was something that was, in Jespar's experience, characteristic for nobles. Remembering the skystone in his pocket, Jespar's hands reached for the hilts of his daggers.

Fool.

Why had they gone so far out?

Lysia raised her hands. “We can settle this peacefully,” she said, and went through her pockets. She pulled out a pouch of coins and offered it to the woman. “That’s more than enough, isn’t it?”

The woman looked at the pouch but didn’t touch it. The corners of her mouth twitched downward. “You think that’s what we are? Robbers?”

Lysia froze. “I thought—”

One of the men, a bulky Kilèan with skin so dark he might have passed for a Qyranian, grabbed the pouch and flung it to the ground, sending a shower of coins flying across the hardpan. “Keep your *kazuum* blood money. You’re in this because you work for the master leeches.”

Leeches?

Things fell into place.

“You’re with the Scythe,” Jespar said.

With a joyless smile, the Makehu woman drew her scimitar. The three men followed her example. “Well observed. And you’re working for the magnates, so we can’t let you leave this place alive.”

Jespar’s hands shot to his daggers, but he froze a second before he reached them. There was something in the Makehu woman’s eyes.

Doubt.

They’re not sure.

Of course not—if they were, they wouldn’t have bothered revealing their presence, but would have simply attacked from their hiding place instead.

Jespar forced himself to raise his hands, away from his weapons, exposing his chest. “Look, I think this is a misunderstanding. We’re just travelers, and we’re not working for the magnates.”

“Bullshit,” the bulky man said.

The woman, however, hesitated. “Then what about that scroll you’re carrying?”

Jespar’s mouth was dry. He licked his lips. “Huh?”

The woman nodded at the front pockets of Jespar's gambeson. "Earlier in the Kraken, when you paid the innkeeper, you also pulled out a scroll with the coalition's sigil. We saw it."

The contract.

Jespar's heart beat faster. "No idea what you're talking about," he said. "As I said, we're not working for the magnate. This is a misunderstanding."

"Bullshit," the bulky man said again, showcasing his broad vocabulary.

"Shut up, Ezos," the woman said. She nodded to one of her other companions. "Vaal—search him."

Jespar tensed. He shot a glance at Lysia, who observed the situation with a blank face, her hands on her hips— ready to reach her baton if the situation demanded it.

Four against two, Jespar thought.

Bad odds, but they could do it. He'd survived the ambush, hadn't he? Yes, they could. *If* Lysia fought as well as she healed, which he had no way of knowing.

The man named Vaal approached Jespar, his eyes locked on Jespar's hands. "The belt." *Beyld.* Jespar hesitated. Handing over his daggers felt like giving away your coat in a rainstorm—then again, insisting to keep his weapons probably did little to convince them of his harmlessness. If push came to shove, he still had the throwing knife on his boot, and it seemed as though the Scythes hadn't noticed it yet.

"Are you deaf?" the man repeated.

Jespar sighed and did as asked, sweat forming on his palms as his girdle changed owner. Systematically, the man searched each of his pouches. Jespar did in fact have the contract with him; the woman had been right about that. He had also accidentally flashed it when he paid for their drinks and the information in the tavern.

But then he stowed it in far-harder-to-find inside pocket of his armor, where it rested next to the skystone. "There's a piece of paper," Vaal announced, his hands lost in one of Jespar's satchels.

What?

Lysia tensed beside him.

The Makehu woman's face clouded. "Is it...?"

Vaal drew a folded piece of paper from Jespar's satchel, unfolded and read it. First, his expression grew harder. Then he scoffed.

"Those are scores for a game of *Vuua*."

Game?

When he understood, he could barely suppress a sigh of relief. The night of his arrival, when he'd been drinking with the sailors, he'd also played some kind of betting game with them that involved colored stones and dice. The note must have been a memento he'd forgotten about.

He tried a conciliatory smile. "See? I told you this was a misunderstanding."

The woman studied him for a breath longer, then her features relaxed. "Fair enough—you can go. But next time you come here, be careful where you go. Not all—"

"Hang on," Vaal said. "Let me search the rest of him. I'm sure he has hidden pockets or something. And the woman as well, for that matter." He turned to Jespar, looking almost apologetic. "Sorry, friend, but we need to be sure you're not leeches. Because if you are, I couldn't sleep knowing that we let you go."

Jespar's throat tightened. He looked at the Makehu woman.

Say no.

Just say no, turn around, and leave.

She sighed. "All right. But be quick ab—"

Jespar rammed his right knee into Vaal's groin. Simultaneously, he drew his throwing knife from the sheath sown to his boot and slashed it across the man's throat. Vaal's eyes widened. He dropped the girdle and his hands shot up and grabbed Jespar by the wrists. Blood flowed from his throat, spraying across Jespar's face, but his grip was ironclad. For some leaden seconds, they struggled, then the man's arms weakened, and his knees buckled. Jespar shoved him to the ground.

Three against two.

Jespar dropped his throwing knife, scooped up the bloodstained belt on the ground, and drew his daggers.

The others awoke from their stasis.Her face contorted into a mask of fury, the Makehu woman lunged at Jespar, thrusting her weapon at Jespar's neck. It might have been the end of their journey, if Lysia hadn't pushed him aside. Briefly, it seemed as though he would lose his footing, but he regained his balance and spun around, unsheathing his second dagger. The brawny man closed in on Lysia, who had drawn her baton, holding it at the side handle, the body of the weapon aligned with the length of her underarm. The third man, skinny and tall, and the Makehu woman, came for Jespar.

The fight was quick and brutal, a haze of steel, blood, and heat. When it was over, the tall man was on the ground, blood seeping from a cut along his throat. The tattooed woman lay only a step from the dead dog, a deep gash in her thigh where Jespar's dagger had entered in a riposte attack that had been more luck than skill. She did know how to fight. Though she clutched her wound with both hands, a stream of blood had already soaked the dry soil under her.

His breath heavy and his pulse hammering against the insides of his wrists, Jespar became aware of the blood running down the length of his arm. A wound in his shoulder formed a dark red stain on the cloth. Thanks to the battle fervor still racing through his veins, it barely hurt. He knew it would soon.

Lysia.

She stood where she'd been when the fight started, the dark-skinned man laying motionless at her feet. Lysia held her side and had a cut on her forehead, but that seemed to be the extent of her injuries.

Lysia noticed him. "You're bleeding."

"... Yeah."

She cast a last look at the attackers. None of them except for the Makehu woman still moved, and she didn't look capable of springing to her feet anytime soon.

Jespar didn't argue. Lysia walked over and studied the cut. Now that the battle fervor was wearing off, it hurt like a bitch.

"You're lucky... They missed the artery. Hold on."

She took her utensils from her pouch and cut open Jespar's gambeson to expose the bloodied flesh beneath. Then she disinfected her hands and the wound with a piece of cloth soaked in alcohol. A few houses over, a man laughed. Some dogs barked in the distance.

A strange feeling settled in Jespar—triumph underpinned by emptiness. The primal part of his brain celebrated the victory, but the rational part felt that sense of innate injustice that always came after a battle: The realization that he would live on, whereas other lives had ended.

Lysia withdrew the soaked cloth, hesitated, then cupped her palm over the wound.

"What are you doing?"

"Making it better."

A golden shimmer emanated from her palm. Warmth that simultaneously felt cold prickled in his flesh and soothed the burning. When Lysia was done, she winced. Droplets of sweat had formed on her forehead.

"Are you okay?" Jespar asked.

"... Yeah. Just the usual arcane fever." She exhaled, brushed a fringe that had come loose back behind her ear. "I'd close the whole wound if I could, but a spell that potent would mean two days in bed with a feeling like my skull was about to explode, so that'll have to do."

She applied more salve to the wound and finished by bandaging it.

"Thanks," Jespar said when she was done. The pain had subsided to a dull throbbing. Again, he said, "You're a lifesaver."

This time she merely nodded. She tipped her chin at the attackers. "The scrawny one and the one who searched you are gone, but we might still save the woman and the one I knocked out."

Jespar glanced around. Except for them, the courtyard was still deserted. "Do you think that's a good idea? Considering what just happened, I doubt they're in the mood for making up and grabbing drinks together."

"They won't," Lysia said. "But let's at least talk to her. We owe her that much."

Do we? Jespar thought, but didn't argue. They went over to where the Makehu woman lay, curled and bleeding. Jespar kicked away the scimitar that glinted in the sunlight an arm-length away from her. Not before they squatted down next to the woman did Jespar notice her words were more than just delirious babble.

"...Leech... leeches. Godsdamned leeches."

Lysia gave Jespar a sidelong glance. He frowned. She drew a long breath.

"Is there a way to end this without killing you?" Lysia asked the woman.

There was a long pause before the woman opened her eyes. Jespar recognized the look in them: hatred. The same he'd felt from the Makehu worker whom the guards had denied a bath. "R...rot in Hell," she said. "The... twins will... cr—" She moaned. Pressed her wound harder.

An expression passed over Lysia's face—half anger, half sadness. "The twins, huh? Are they also responsible for what happened to the First Magnate? Are you?"

No reply. Slowly, the woman's grip loosened. Her chest still rose and fell, but that was all.

"She's going to die," Jespar said. "And even if she weren't, we'd have to kill her and the other guy. If we don't, and they somehow manage to survive, we'll have the entire Scythe from Yuva at our heels."

Lysia closed her eyes and rubbed them. Then she nodded, almost imperceptibly. "Okay. Can... you do it?"

"Yes." Jespar unsheathed one of his daggers, his hands feeling cold against the sun-heated leather of the hilt. It was still bloodstained. Just when he brought it to the Makehu woman's throat, she opened her eyes again.

"Y...your fault," she said. Her voice was faint and she slurred her words. "The pawn is as... as guilty as the m...master."

There was a short silence.

Lysia grabbed the Makehu woman by the chin and lifted her head. "Last time I checked, you were the terrorists. You don't change things for the better by killing people."

Against all odds, the woman opened her eyes one last time. Tears were on her lower lids—whether from pain, fear, or something else, Jespar didn't know. "...not like we haven't trie..."

Lysia's jaw flexed. Her grip on the woman's face hardened. "Tried what?"

The woman moved her mouth again, but this time, her words were unintelligible. Some breaths later, she fell silent.

"Unconscious," Jespar said.

For a moment, Lysia was quiet. Then she let go off the woman and stood. "This is my fault. You were right, we shouldn't have gone so far from the populated areas."

Jespar stood as well, his knees cracking as he did so. "They would have found another window to attack us eventually. Also, I was the one who waved that scroll around like an idiot."

"Yeah, maybe. At least we know now that Enkshi was right—Oonai does have enemies everywhere." She let her gaze wander over the battle site. "I guess I just didn't think it would get bloody so quickly."

"Neither did I," Jespar said.

Lysia gave him a grateful look. "Well. We should probably finish what we started. No point in delaying the inevitable."

They killed the survivors. First the Makehu woman, then the man. When the latter stopped breathing, they discussed telling the guards about what happened, but quickly discarded the idea—they would want answers, and Enkshi's instructions about discretion were clear. They moved the corpses into one of the deserted shacks instead, all the while Jespar tried to ignore the image of two playing children stumbling upon them by chance.

He remembered Lysia's words: *I didn't expect things to get bloody so quickly.*

Something told him this was only the beginning.

When they were done, they washed their hands with what little water they had left, and went deeper into the maws of Yuva. Behind them, the flies let off the dog's carcass.

They scented the new food.

Chapter 6

Takana

JUST AS THE FOG SUNK AND THE DEEPER into the city Jespar and Lysia went, the buildings grew taller and taller. By the time they reached the market, a cramped plaza where vendors hawked their wares into the bustling mass of skin, sweat, and sound that was the crowd, Jespar constantly had to remind himself that they were still on a tropical island and not trapped in a feverish dream. The decrepit towers and houses loomed high above them, their shadows turning the alleys and canyon-like streets into a gloomy maze, while the fog crept just above ground level and made it impossible to see more than ten arm-lengths ahead. Jespar barely noticed its stench anymore, but somehow that only made it worse; breathing felt like sucking in invisible parasites you didn't notice until their eggs hatched.

And hatch they did. People coughed from swollen throats, and blisters marked their faces. A Makehu woman held on to a lamppost and spat out blood, wine-red stains on her white reed skirt. And, still, everybody went about their daily business as though this were normal. *Because it is*, Jespar thought and pulled his scarf, repurposed into a mouth-cloth, up to also a cover his nose. Probably as effective as a loincloth in a blizzard, but a drowning man would clutch at a twig. Or was it a straw? He didn't remember, and he didn't care.

Lysia hadn't spoken much since the incident at the town square, and Jespar appreciated the silence. He didn't feel like discussing or thinking about it more than necessary — neither the fact that he'd barely escaped death for the second time in two days, nor that he was responsible for two more deaths, self-defense or not. During his time with the Gallowmen, he'd learned that every soldier had their own way of dealing with taking another life. A rare few enjoyed it and bragged, some smothered the memory the moment

it formed, many repeatedly reminded themselves of why they'd been in the right. Most, including Jespar, were silent until the visceral reality of the killing faded and eventually turned into a memory.

Then, they moved on.

Jespar and Lysia had left the market behind them and were walking down a wide, crowded street, when Lysia pulled Jespar from his thoughts by putting a hand on his shoulder. "Look. I think that's it."

Jespar's eyes followed hers.

Farther up ahead, it seemed as though the ground simply disappeared. After blinking twice, he understood what he was looking at: A massive crater opened up at the end of the road.

"The Pit," Lysia said. "The name fits, doesn't it?"

"Uh-huh." Jespar squinted. Shapes moved through the fog all around the crater, giant cranes and other contraptions swiveled about. People shouted, wood creaked, metal clanked. "And that's where the dreamwalker lives?"

"Around here, according to the innkeeper. Let's get some directions."

The Pit was as deep as it was wide, with circular tiers that decreased in diameter the farther down they went. Workers crowded every stage and hacked away at the rock under their feet, squatting down every now and then to pick up a turquoise nugget and toss it into a nearby crate. Uniformed men and women patrolled the tiers, barked orders, and coordinated the countless carts, barrels, and crates that were pushed, hoisted, and pulleyed around.

With one nuvium nugget priced at several hundred sêr apiece, Jespar tried to imagine the money these mines produced every day. *A lot.* Not much of it seemed to stay with the island or its inhabitants.

Lysia approached one of the overseers, a man with a mustache that would have triumphed over every walrus in the Civilized World. She asked him about Takana.

Walrus Man looked surprised. "The crazy one? What on Vyn do you want from her?"

"Business."

Walrus Man arched his equally bushy eyebrows. Then, he shrugged and flicked a thumb over his shoulder. “She and her family live in a shack on the plains just behind the longhouses... hers is the only house right by the shore, so you should have no trouble finding it.” He hesitated. “You’re sure you know what you’re doing? There are rumors that people go cra—”

“Jevan!” a woman shouted. She stood a few steps away from them, coordinating a group of miners who were cleaning nuvium nuggets in water barrels. “You’re not getting paid to chat! Get your coinless ass over here!”

“All right, all right!” Walrus Man shouted back. “Sorry, friends,” he said to Jespar and Lysia. “You heard the boss. May you prosper.”

He walked off. Jespar wetted his cracked lower lip—a layer of nuvium dust had gathered on it, so it tasted sour. “Well. Shall we?”

The longhouses were a motley of oblong buildings ten minutes’ walk from the Pit, high, wooden dwellings with slits for windows. As if to counteract the dreary surroundings, each of the buildings was painted a different bright color. Men and women sat before them and chatted, children played in the streets, dogs chased each other over the gravel, all of them unfazed by the dust. The longhouses almost formed a small town by themselves, so it took Jespar and Lysia a while to reach the plains the overseer had talked about, an expanse of rocks, earth, and shrubs that extended down a long slope behind the longhouses and flowed into the shoreline in the distance. Shanties carpeted the plain, but, oddly enough, they clustered inland and thinned out toward the coast. Jespar, picturing the ocean breeze, would have expected it to be the other way around. Only when they reached the coast did he understand why: The sea was tainted.

Lysia halted and covered her nose. “Stars burn me. Do you smell that?”

Jespar, who had believed his olfactory nerves were dead from over-stimulation, did. Not only did the water look as though someone had poured barrels full of tar into it, but it smelled like tar mixed with the contents of the islands’ privies. The taint stretched on for hundreds of arm-lengths, before it slowly faded into the blue of the ocean.

Jespar squinted. “Yeah. What on Vyn is that?”

"I don't know. But I'd rather not find out."

As the overseer had promised, it didn't take them long to find Takana's hut. It was right by the ocean, sitting on a small cliff that was all rocks and lichen, at least fifteen minutes' walk from the next shanty. The hut was maybe twenty arm-lengths long and wide, with bamboo walls and a thatched palm roof.

They stopped a few steps from the front porch. The sun, though westering, still burned Jespar's reddened cheeks, and the wound on his shoulder throbbed under the bandage. His mouth was dry, but their water had run out.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hello?!"

No reaction.

He tried again. Nothing.

"Let's knock," Lysia said. She went up to the door and raised her fist.

The world vanished.

Jespar stood on a frozen ocean. It was endless—ice as far as the eye could see, under a curtain of black clouds. Even though there was no sun in the sky, not even a silhouette, a pale half-light enfolded the scene. The air was freezing, but somehow Jespar didn't feel cold.

What...?

He looked at his feet. The ice under his boots was milky, like congealed mist.

Then it cleared.

One moment, he'd been looking at a murky gray. The next, it was transparent and he stared into an endless depth beneath.

Something came floating up.

Small. Round.

No.

Panic shot into his muscles, his instincts telling him to run, but he was paralyzed. He made a sound that was half-croak, half-whimper.

Gods, no.

The Corpse's head.

Strands of muscle and pieces of skin trailed from his severed neck, a cloud of black blood followed him like an octopus' ink. Its skin was bloated, his lips swollen and blue; the thick, gray strands of his hair floated around his skull.

He opened its eyes.

A flicker.

Jespar was back in Yuva. Warm air surrounded him, the reek of the polluted ocean in his nostrils. Solid earth was under his feet.

Lysia stood by the door, her fist still in mid-air. Slowly, she turned to face him, her mouth half-open, her jaw trembling.

"Did you—did you see...?"

Jespar swallowed hard. "Yes."

"What in the seven holy *fucks* was that?"

"I—I have no idea. I mean, I was here, and then I was—"

"Standing on a frozen ocean?"

Jespar nodded weakly. "Yes."

For a breath, they kept looking at each other, as if hoping the other one held the answer to the question. Finally, Lysia sighed and wiped the sweat off her forehead. She smiled, but it seemed forced. "Well, I'm sure Ma'saa Takana will be eager to explain."

She knocked again. Jespar winced, but this time, there was no shift of reality. There was also no answer. She tried again. Same result.

Jespar walked up beside her. "I don't think anyone's home. We should—"

Someone screamed from behind the door. Lysia cast Jespar an alarmed glance. He returned it and rattled the doorknob. As expected, it didn't budge.

"Locked," Jespar said. "Probably some kind of security bar on the inside."

"Can you pick it?"

"I think so, yeah."

He squatted down, took a finger-long, thin steel rod from his pouch and slid it through the crack in the door. He felt found the bar and looked for the locking cradle. Another

scream came from inside, followed by a moan and then silence. He shot a glance over his shoulder. No one in sight.

"You got it?" Lysia asked, sounding nervous.

"Almost."

He found the locking cradle and tried to lift the bar with the steel rod. It was easier than expected—probably palmwood too, barely enough to withstand a shoulder ram. He lifted the bar from the cradle and carefully eased it to the ground to not cause any noise. He stood, his knees cracking as he did so.

"There we go."

They slid inside and quietly closed the door behind them. Briefly, they stood still and waited for their eyes to adjust to the gloom.

No one home.

The room was dark except for faint rays of afternoon sun that fell through the slits of the bamboo wall, tinged green by the nuvium fog.

The hut was divided into two areas, one for living and eating in the front, one, Jespar surmised, for sleeping in the back. A wooden screen separated them, the opening in its middle covered by a dark green curtain. A knee-high, round stone table made the centerpiece of the living room, five sitting cushions placed around it. To Jespar's right, there was a kitchen, a bunch of plantains on the crude cabinet, and rice sacks leaning against the stove.

Someone muttered.

Jespar's eyes darted across the room. Only then did he notice the woman sitting in a wicker chair in the right corner on the opposite side of the room. Obscured by shadows and sitting perfectly still, Jespar simply hadn't noticed her. He glanced at Lysia. She didn't move a muscle, eyes fixed on the woman, hand on the hilt of her baton.

"Hello?" Jespar said.

The woman didn't react. She continued her mumbling in a language Jespar didn't understand.

"Uhm... can you hear us? I'm sorry we entered, but we heard someone scream, so we wanted to make sure everyone's all right."

Nothing.

"Hello?" Jespar repeated.

"I don't think she can hear us," Lysia said.

"Hm. She must have been the one who screamed, though, right? There's no one else here."

"Probably. You think that's her? Takana?"

"Maybe," Jespar said. Tentatively, they approached her. Still no reaction.

Takana—if it was her— was older than he had expected. Enkshi and Ma'saa Oonai hadn't known her age, so Jespar had somehow surmised her to be in her late twenties, or early thirties. The woman in the wicker chair was at least in her forties, possibly even older. Wrinkles marked her face, clustering on her forehead and the folds between the corners of her mouth and her nose. Shadows underlined her eyes, blending with the tattooing around the sockets: A pattern of broad brush strokes pointing outward.

A bowl containing a mushy broth and a mug of water sat on a table beside her, both untouched. Jespar gave Lysia a sidelong glance.

He said, "Takana?"

The ocean.

He was back on the ocean, and the ice cleared, but this time it *broke.* The water swallowed him. He screamed, clung on to a floe, but, *Gods,* the Corpse's head was beside him, face turned up, and it opened its eyes, its mouth, and said—

Flicker.

He was back in the hut, back in Yuva, back in Kilé, back in the world of matter. Before him, Takana was screaming, pressing her hands against her temples, the tendons of her neck bulging as if about to burst.

Then she stopped. Her head lolled to the side. Her eyes fell shut, and she sank back into the chair.

Gods.

By the fucking Gods.

What the hell is happening?

Clutching his daggers so hard his knuckles showed white, he looked at Lysia. Her face was pale as bleached bone, her mouth half open.

Takana opened her eyes. “Son?”

Before either of them could react, the door of the hut swung open. The panic still in his veins, Jespar drew his daggers and whirled around.

A young Makehu stood in the doorframe, backdropped by the westering sun. He was supporting an older man, one arm around his shoulder, the other around his waist. A girl and a boy stood behind them. In the batting of an eyelash, Jespar realized he was looking at a family: Father, son, children.

Takana’s family.

The girl was the first to notice the intruders. With a shriek, she darted behind the young man, who, while continuing to support his father with his left, grabbed a small pitchfork leaning next to the door with his right. He pointed it at Jespar and Lysia.

“Get. Out.” His hands were trembling.

The vision still fresh in his mind, Jespar fumbled for words. Finally, he sheathed his daggers and raised his hands. “This is a misunderstanding.”

The young man scoffed. “You broke into our house. There’s nothing to misunderstand about that.”

“Wait,” Lysia said. “He’s right. We meant to wait for you, but then your mother started screaming, so we went in to check on her. I swear.”

While the young man didn’t move, his father relaxed a little. He put a hand on his son’s shoulder and said something in Makehu. The young Makehu replied, his expression unchanged. Behind him, the little boy began to cry.

They might have remained like this for a lot longer if Takana hadn’t spoken up behind them.

“Son? Is that you?”

The young man’s eyes flicked to his mother. His frown softened, but only slightly. “Mother. Did they... did they harm you?”

Takana slowly turned her head to face Jespar and Lysia, as though she'd only just become aware of them. "What? They? No, of course not. They... they are good people. You are, aren't you?"

Perplexed, Jespar answered, "...Yeah. We are."

Takana smiled. "See? I told you. Good people." Her gaze trailed off. "The ocean is endless, you know? There is just water, water for miles, and you are always alone, even in your *tuewa*, and the loneliness eats you... your souls and your mind. But you know what the elders say? They say that, one day, the Mother-Father will come and they will help us gifted ones sleep. They will make us dream, just for one night, like the others do, and when we wake up again, our souls will be rested and we will be happy. Happy." She looked at Lysia. Tears glistened on her cheeks. "Are you the Mother-Father?"

"The...? I'm sorry, I don't—"

"Mother-Father, you... have to help me. Me and him. All I ask for is one night, you know? One night of oblivion." Her voice had fallen to a whisper. "Please."

The old Makehu pushed past his son. "Takwhe."

The young Makehu frowned. "Father—"

"Quiet."

He limped across the room, dragging his right leg after him, his face twitching in pain with every step. The young Makehu hesitated, then sighed and went after his father, all the while Takana mumbled on.

The man squatted down next to the wicker chair and took his wife's hand, ignoring Jespar and Lysia, who watched the scene with a mixture of helplessness and confusion. He said something in Makehu, his voice low and soothing.

Takana fell quiet. She looked at her husband, her sunburst tattoos still moist with tears. Then a weak smile tugged at the corners of her lips, almost bashful. "Oh. It's you."

She closed her eyes and sunk back into her chair.

A moment passed in silence.

The old Makehu stood slowly. Two dark blue eyes faced Jespar and Lysia, sockets framed by solid, black tattooing.

"I want explanation."

"As I told you," Jespar said, "we didn't mean to break in, but we heard the scream."

"*Yuz*, I believe you. But why two *wakhem* come here?" He nodded at his son, who still clutched the pitchfork. The boy and the girl stood in the doorframe, holding each other's hands and watching Jespar and Lysia warily.

The old Makehu faced his son. "Kawu. Tea."

Chapter 7

Chances

BY THE TIME JESPAR AND LYSIA FINISHED TALKING, the light seeping through the bamboo walls had taken on a brownish color, the orange of dusk mixing with the green of the nuvium dust. They'd left their story vague, as instructed, mentioning only that they were working for a magnate who needed Takana's help regarding a health matter.

The father, whose name was Maiyaro, sipped from his tea. "I understand." He, his son Kawu, and Jespar and Lysia sat cross-legged around the eating table, the skystone between them. Maiyaro had sent the two children out to play while his wife slept in the back room.

"And if Takana succeeds, she gets the skystone in return," Jespar said. "It'll bring you at least eighty thousand sêr if you sell it. Enough so you'll never have to work again."

Maiyaro carefully placed his cup back on the table. "I know what stone is worth," he says. "But thank for telling."

Kawu followed their conversation silently, as he had done since its beginning. The age difference aside, he looked a lot like his father—the same medium-length black hair, the same fine-featured face with no facial hair. Only his eyes were his mother's, a pale green. He had no tattoos.

"But we can't help," Maiyaro said. "My wife is ill—has been for a time."

An illness, Jespar thought, *that causes spontaneous visions in bystanders.*

"We noticed," Lysia said. "Maybe we could help her. I'm a healer, and I've dealt with afflictions of sanity before."

Maiyaro gave his son a questioning glance at the mention of the word "sanity." Kawu said a word in Makehu. His father replied in the same tongue, and Kawu turned to face

Lysia. “My father says that we are grateful for your offer, but you won’t be able to help her.” His Inâl was perfect—not even a Kiléan accent—but there was nonetheless something odd in the way he spoke, as though he carefully weighed and arranged every word before he said it. “What my mother has isn’t an ordinary ‘affliction of sanity.’”

“What is it then?” Jespar asked. “If the question isn’t too personal…”

Kawu glanced at his father, who nodded.

“It’s hard to explain,” Kawu said. “If you know about dreamwalkers, then you probably also know that the gift comes with many burdens. Put shortly, my mother has lost her grip on *akhara,* the waking world, which is something that happens to many dreamwalkers. Her mind constantly flickers back and forth between dream and reality.”

Jespar remembered the frozen ocean—and the Corpse’s severed head. He placed his palm on his shoulder wound—it had begun to throb again. “I’m sorry to hear that. And I’m guessing her condition has something to do with those visions we got?”

Kawu seemed surprised. “Visions?”

“Yeah, I don’t know what else to call it. Just before your mother started screaming, it was as though we were somewhere else all of a sudden.”

Kawu made a pensive noise. “Then you must be mages.”

“I am,” Lysia said. “He isn’t.”

“To a certain extent he must be; otherwise nothing would have happened. A lot of people have a spark of magical talent in them, usually without being aware of it.” To Jespar, he said, “Are you a light sleeper, or do you get headaches often?”

“…Yes.”

“Then that’s because you have a modicum of magic in you. Not enough to see other eventualities or to even light a candle, but still…”

Lysia wrinkled her forehead. “Are you also a mage?”

“No,” Kawu said. “But my mother taught me a lot. Either way—these visions you experienced were caused by my mother’s seizures. She… how do I put it? She pulled your mind into the In-Between.”

“The what?” Jespar asked.

"The place between *akhara* and *tuewa*… the portal between reality and dream, if you will. Normal people are usually unconscious when they enter it, but because of my mother's seizure, you—"

"We sorry, *ma'sae*," the old Makehu cut in, "we not want to waste time. All you need know is my wife is very ill and cannot help. Now, you please leave."

Jespar glanced at the skystone. *A fortune at your fingertips, and you don't even bother looking for solutions.*

Why?

Something clicked.

Jespar faced Kawu. "You have the gift too, don't you? You're a dreamwalker."

There was the briefest of pauses. "I'm not."

"Yes," Jespar said, "you are. You said that 'normal' people are unconscious when crossing that 'In-Between' place, by which you excluded yourself. Which, in turn, means that you could help us if you want."

Kawu averted his eyes.

Maiyaro sighed. "*Yuz*, son dreamwalk too. Answer still *no*."

"Why?" Jespar said. "Forgive me, but I don't understand. This gem is worth a fortune."

Maiyaro's cheeks flushed. "Because dreamwalking is dangerous! Dreamwalking is a curse, not gift, and son will not risk life for magnate!" He drew a deep breath. "Now, leave."

No "please" this time.

After a moment's pause, Lysia leaned forward, elbows resting on the table.

"Look," she said, "I understand your concern, and we are deeply sorry for what happened to your wife—as I said, I would try treating her, but if you say that there's no cure for her condition, well, we believe you. However, before you decide, please hear us out. Please?"

Maiyaro said nothing.

"Thank you," Lysia said. "So, when I told you why we're here, we didn't give you the full truth because we weren't supposed to, but if dreamwalking is really as dangerous as

you say, then you deserve to know it." Jespar gave her an alarmed look, but she continued, "We're not working for just any magnate, but for the First Magnate himself, Jaaros Ismiraael Oonai."

Though he tried to conceal it, surprise passed over Maiyaro's face.

"It's true," Lysia said. "And he also isn't just ill; he's dying. What has happened is that he has fallen into some kind of supernatural coma, and none of the healers have an explanation for it—they've just never seen anything like it. Ma'saa Oonai hopes that we can find out what happened to her husband—and cure him—by entering his mind." She brushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. "Now, you might still think that this is none of your business, and I hear you, but, unfortunately, it is *all* of our business. And do you know why? Because if the First Magnate dies, he'll leave a power void, and there's a lot of dangerous people in the archipelago who'd jump at the chance to fill it. I'm sure you're familiar with the Scythe?"

"Yuz," Maiyaro said.

"Well, then you also know that they've gained a lot of power over the past year, all across the archipelago. Now, of course, Ma'saa Oonai has been trying to keep her husband's condition from the public, but word is bound to get out eventually, if it hasn't already.

"And what do you think is going to happen if the Scythe learns that the shepherd of the country is on the verge of death and, hence, unable to act? Damn right they're going to pounce on the opportunity, and before you know it, you'll have a civil war at your doorstep… not just in Uunil, but on every single island. And even if the Scythe doesn't act, rest assured that someone else will. Whichever way you look at it, a lot of people are going to die, not just insurgents or guards, but innocent people. So, there you have it—if there still *is* a chance to stop all this from happening, then it's through you. I know you never asked for this burden, but it is what it is."

It was a good speech, a genuine one, but its effect seemed lost on the two Makehu. His face expressionless, Maiyaro turned to his son. Kawu said something in Makehu,

probably a summary of what Lysia had said. Maiyaro softly shook his head and emptied the last of his tea. “Kawu—please tell *wakhem* story of Yuva. They don’t know.”

Kawu hesitated. Then he lowered his gaze. “Of course.” He began talking, slowly and deliberately, as it seemed his habit. “Yuva wasn’t always like this. In fact, it was a different world only two decades ago. *Yuz,* it has always been a mining island, and thus never the greenest in the archipelago, but there were trees, and the ocean was nothing like what the mines turned it into. More importantly, however, the people were different.”

“How so?” Jespar asked.

In the back of the hut, Takana gave a soft whimper. Maiyaro and Kawu tensed, but when she fell silent a moment later, Kawu continued.

“Less crime, at least… and there was a sense of comradeship. Most of this was because the magnates didn’t own the mines back then, but two Yuvanian families did, one Makehu, one Kiléan.” Kawu ran a hand through his hair. His fingers were lithe and uncalloused, not the hands of a laborer. “And they were good people. Merchants, of course, but good people—as long as you didn’t cross them. They cared for their workers, who were allowed to spend one day a week with their families while still receiving pay, and the mine continued to give their workers a fraction of their pay when they became too old to continue, or some accident happened.” For a flicker, Kawu glanced at his father, whose face betrayed no emotion. “To make a long story short, when word spread across the archipelago of how well the Yuvanian workers lived, they rose up.”

“And demanded rights,” Lysia said.

“*Yuz*—which would have cost the coalition millions of sêr. So, the magnates reacted.”

Jespar frowned. “What did they do?”

“Officially? Nothing. They couldn’t simply disown the two families, they were too influential for that. Instead, an ‘accident’ happened in the Pit. It was already the biggest mine back then, and both families owned parts of it.”

“An ‘accident’…” Lysia repeated.

"A rockslide that buried well over four hundred people under it. I suppose you can imagine how the rest of the story goes. The rockslide ruined the two merchant families, and the coalition pressured them into selling. Can you guess who bought it?"

"Jaaros Oonai," Jespar said.

"*Yuz.* From there on in, there were no more retirement or accident pays. It was almost as though the coalition was trying to punish us. More veins were opened up all over the island, and the fog grew denser and denser, killing off what little green was left. All the while the salaries went down and crime exacerbated. And this, *ma'sae,* is how our country became the place it is today. Everybody knows the coalition is behind the accident, but no one dares to speak out. Or, well, that is not precisely true—there was a protest weeks after it happened, but the Jade Carapace itself quashed it. No people were killed, of course, but a lot of protesters were wounded. That was the last time the Yuvanians ever stood up for their rights… until now."

Outside, a dog barked. The muddy rays falling into the hut had faded. Jespar had to think of the Scythe woman with the vine tattoos around her eyes. *It's not like we haven't tried.*

Maiyaro rejoined the conversation. "Maybe this helps understand why Scythe is so liked on Yuva. And, no, we don't support. But we also no feel sympathy for Oonai." He slid the skystone back to Jespar's and Lysia's half of the table. "I'm sorry."

Silence ensued.

"Then there's going to be a civil war," Lysia said. She sounded tired.

"Maybe," Maiyaro said. "But maybe other greedy merchant fills Oonai's place, and things go on like before. Or maybe Scythe takes over country and makes better. You don't know." He gestured to Kawu. "Son, go find Ekha and Guwi. Getting dark."

Kawu nodded and rose, offering help to his father. Maiyaro waved his hand and got to his feet on his own, his face twitching with pain as he did so.

Lysia watched them quietly. Then she sighed, took the skystone, and put it back into one of her pouches. "Fair enough," she said. "Fair enough."

A thought crossed Jespar's mind. *Chances. Not obstacles.*

"You are wasting a chance."

All eyes turned to him.

"Look," Jespar said, standing up, "You dislike the magnates, and I understand that—you certainly have all the reason to. But why don't we leave them out of the equation and talk about you for a moment? And your family?" He glanced around the house. "I said it before, but the skystone is worth a fortune."

Maiyaro squinted. "We don't need money."

Yes, you do. The two children were too young to work, and Maiyaro and his wife weren't able to, which meant that their eldest son, the dreamwalker, provided the only income, and judging by the state of the hut, it was barely enough to get by. *But you're too proud to take it.*

"Maybe you don't," Jespar said, "but what about your children or your future grandchildren? The money from the stone is not just enough to ensure a good life for this generation, but also for the next ten generations to follow. Would you really have them grow up in poverty instead?"

"You understand nothing," Maiyaro said. He spoke quietly, but Jespar could feel the hurt under the layer of control.

Of course Jespar had known the Makehu would react this way, and felt guilty for it, but he also knew it was necessary if his argument was to work. After all, it wasn't he Jespar had to convince.

"I understand that there are more layers to your decision than may be obvious at first glance," Jespar said. "And your family and your children's offspring are only the beginning. Think of your people, the Makehu."

"What do you mean?" Kawu asked. It earned him a reprimanding look from his father, but he ignored it.

"Well," Jespar said, "it's no secret that your people are being ostracized. Not overtly, of course, but they are. I mean, how many of the magnates are Makehu? Zero?"

Kawu said, "There are the elders. They represent our interests in Kilé."

"Fair enough, the elders. But tell me, how much influence do they really have? I mean, *really*. Something tells me that the coalition only ever asks their opinion when they know it doesn't contradict their own interests." This was a guess—Jespar knew the bare-bones of Kiléan politics and had simply assumed the rest. As Kawu's expression betrayed, it wasn't far off the mark. "Elders or not," Jespar continued, "the fact is, and that's obvious even to an outlander such as myself, that there are next to no Makehu in the elite." He nodded at the pouch at Lysia's belt where she had put the skystone. "But there could be, with your help. With the money from this gem, you'd have the funds to start your own business, you could work your way to the top, and by doing so not just give your own family a better life, but even become a voice for all the Makehu across the archipelago."

Kawu studied Jespar, as if searching his face for dishonesty. "You say this as though it were so simple."

"I'm not saying it's simple. But it's a once in a lifetime chance." He showed his palms. "Of course, it's up to you. We've taken up enough of your time, and if you want us to leave, we will do so now."

"Then do," Maiyaro said. "Leave, as I say three times before."

Jespar remained a breath longer, eyes locked on Kawu.

Finally, he dropped his hands. "All right. Thank you for your time."

He went to the door, and after a moment's hesitation, Lysia followed.

His hand was on the handle when Kawu spoke up. "Wait."

Jespar turned around.

"I'll help you," Kawu said. "I'll do it."

Maiyaro stared at his son and said something in Makehu.

Kawu shifted his weight from one leg to the other but held his father's gaze. "I'm sorry, Father. I'm going with them."

His father made a disbelieving noise. "You will not. You'll stay, and—"

"*Yuz,* and do what?" Kawu replied, his hands trembling. "Continue serving meals for that sad old man, for money that's barely enough to fill our bellies? *Kweh,* you know

what he only keeps me in his service becomes he wants something else from me in the long run, don't you?"

Maiyaro's cheeks flushed. He shifted to Makehu, but Kawu's answer only made him angrier. The argument went back and forth until Maiyaro once again told Jespar and Lysia to leave. They did.

"That was manipulative," Lysia said as they sat down on a rock at the bottom of the slope leading up to the hut. The two children played the colored stone game not far from them, looking, by turns, at the house from which the shouting came, and the two *wakhem* on the rock. Jespar waved at them, but they didn't react.

"But nonetheless true," Jespar said. "You saw how they live, didn't you? They need that money like Oonai needs a conscience, at least if you believe their story about Yuva."

"And if the mission goes wrong? What's going to happen to this family if their son doesn't come back?"

"Why wouldn't he? We'll take him to the ziggurat, let him do his dreamwalking thing, and that's it. Easy."

"So far, nothing about this mission has been easy."

"Okay, fair enough. But what are you trying to say, exactly? That you would have preferred he stay?"

Lysia sighed, rubbing the scar on her cheek. "I don't know what I'm trying to say. I guess I'm just worried."

By the time the door of the hut swung open, what little of the fog-covered sun was left had disappeared behind the horizon. The black puddles on the ocean shimmered a faint green, and a breeze had picked up.

Kawu approached them. A bag hung over his shoulder, and he'd put on sandals. His face was a mask.

"I promised them I'd be back within a week," he said. "If Oonai isn't cured by then, I'll return, skystone or not."

Jespar swallowed the yellow gooseberry he'd been eating. The combined efforts of the ocean's stench and the nuvium dust made that part a challenge, but his stomach burned with hunger. "That's all we're asking."

Kawu nodded briefly, then went over to his siblings and hugged them. Jespar's chest felt heavy when the boy began to cry.

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It must have been about an hour before midnight when they reached the ship. As the old servant had promised, he waited for them at the gangplank, his good eye watching the newcomer with curiosity. Introductions were made, explanations given.

An hour later, the yawl was on its way back to the Golden City, and Jespar stood leaning against the ship mast, smoking the last bit of nightflower he had left. With the fresh ocean air in his nostrils and a meal in his stomach, he almost felt human again. Lysia had retreated back below decks, but Kawu was at the rear of the ship, elbows propped on the railing, and watching Yuva's shrinking silhouette on the horizon. The luminescent fog enfolded it like a dying man's breath.

Jespar took one last puff from his pipe and walked over to the young dreamwalker.

"Hey."

Kawu glanced at him. "Hello."

"I just, um, wanted to thank you. For helping us."

He expected a sullen answer. It didn't come.

"You don't have to thank me." Kawu turned his eyes back to the ink-black water. "Your friend was right, you know? If there's going to be a civil war because the First Magnate dies and I could have prevented it, there's blood on my hands as well. Not to mention that we do need the money, regardless of what my father says. He's proud and afraid of losing me, but he doesn't understand that he might lose all three of us if nothing changes." He made a weary sound and shook his head. "So, *yuz*, no need to thank me. If anything, I should thank you for reminding me not to be a coward."

Jespar studied him. Looking at him now, Jespar realized he was even younger than he'd guessed, maybe twenty, maybe twenty-two. Yet there was something about his eyes that made him seem a lot older and that both intrigued and unsettled Jespar, though the former outweighed the latter.

Jespar cleared his throat. "Well, happy to help. There are only two cots below decks, but you can have mine if you want to. I can sleep up here."

"I don't sleep like you do, so no. But thank you."

"Right," Jespar said, "the gift."

"Yuz."

When Kawu didn't elaborate, Jespar took the hint. "Okay. Well, then I better leave you be. Good night."

Looking up, Kawu smiled faintly. "Good night, Ma'sao Dal'Varek."

"Jespar. Just call me Jespar."

"Very well. Jespar."

Jespar made his way back down to his cabin, nodding at Agaam in passing, who stood by the tiller. The old servant returned the nod, not a sign of exhaustion on his face.

Below decks, Lysia sat on the bedside of Jespar's cot, reading the same book she'd read that morning.

"Rejoiceth," she said when he entered, and she put the book down. "Yon noble adventurer hath come to proffer unto this humble wench some meager company."

Jespar slumped down beside her. Stifling a yawn, he ran a hand through his hair. Despite the bucket of water he'd poured over his head when the yawl had left the harbor, it was still sticky and speckled with turquoise dust. He really needed a bath. "What a d—"

Lysia kissed him.

When she withdrew, Jespar smiled. "Now that came out of nowhere."

"Yeah, well, I needed a change from all that gloom," Lysia said, a lop-sided grin on her lips. She ran her right hand up his thigh. "I thought you might, too."

He felt a pleasant warmth prickle just below his navel. *You like her,* he thought.

You do.

Just like that, the prickle died. One moment he'd wanted her, the next he didn't and felt a light pressure in the back of his neck. He hesitated then gently took her hand from his thigh and kissed the back of it. "You're beautiful, you know that?"

"I sense a 'but' coming."

"Ah, it's just… I don't know. I'm still a little rattled, I guess." He slid his back up against the wall. "It's got nothing to do with you."

There was an almost imperceptible pause before Lysia grinned. "Okay. Okay, sure, no problem. Admittedly, sex would have been a little strange anyway given all that's happened. I do have to ask you to take off your shirt, though, to take a look at your wound. I hope that much nudity is bearable."

Jespar made an amused noise. "I can handle it if you can."

He did as asked. Lysia cleaned the wound, applied some salve, then cut off a patch of fresh bandage from a roll she produced from her pouches.

Wrapping it around his arm, she said, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What's your take on the boy?"

"Kawu?"

"Uh-huh."

"Hm. Hard to read."

"Doesn't he make you feel… I don't know, jittery?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, like… nervous, uneasy. No idea why, but there's just something about him that gives me the creeps, and I was wondering if you feel it too."

Jespar gave it some thought. "I know what you mean, yeah, but I wouldn't say that he gives me the creeps. He's unusual, but that's about it."

"Huh. Okay." She finished the bandage and tied it off. Then she wiped her hands with a cloth and yawned heartily, not bothering to cover her mouth. "Well, if you're not in the

mood for sex, let's get some shut-eye, shall we? Something tells me we have an even longer day ahead of us tomorrow."

She swung her legs over the bedside and was halfway back to her own cot when Jespar said, "Wait. Do you want to sleep here?"

She scrunched up an eyebrow. "You want that?"

"Yeah."

A pause.

"Okay. Sure."

They undressed and, leaving the lantern on, curled up on the rough fabric. Lysia cuddled up to Jespar with her back facing him, his arm over her shoulder. They talked for a little more, but Lysia's voice quickly trailed off. A minute later, her chest rose and fell evenly.

It was a long while before Jespar slept, but, for the second night in a row, the dream of the Corpse spared him.

Interlude

Ninety Days Before

"Home," the Man says.

IT FEELS LIKE A LIE. And maybe it is. After all, only his memories make that house in the moonlit palm grove more than just an abandoned shack. Only his memories make it the place where he spent the first eleven years of his life.

"Home," he repeats.

No nostalgia. No comfort. Not even anger.

The Man runs his fingers through his beard. What did he expect? It's the first time he's come back since that one evening that changed it all, and the life the Man leads now could not be more different than that of the Boy who had once slept under that thatched roof. The Man remembers the many times the Boy traveled the road into the city, accompanying Pôpa to the market. Back then, the other farmers and travelers had paid them no more attention than they would have to a pair of donkeys. Would he do the same now without his peasant disguise, the reactions would range from awe to knee-falls, from contemptuous glares to assassination attempts. Given recent events and the decisions he had made, more of the latter than the former.

Strange.

Only six moons ago, he would have enjoyed this mixture of respect and fear his presence evoked in others. "Greatness comes with friends and foes in equal parts." Weren't these his own words?

Now, however, imagining that star struck look on a civilian's face unsettles him almost as much as the thought of a knife at his throat.

He sighs.

What's wrong with you?

The Man circles the hut. The walls and the roof are overgrown with ferns and vines, their fleshy, green leaves and blue flowers concealing the moldy wood. Rosemallows, red and pink, sprout at the base of the wall. Two slits on each side of the shack mark the windows, kept small to keep the heat out, and a broken fence frames the now-wild garden. The Man approaches the two rainwater barrels on the porch. One of them is empty, the other, *that one*, still full.

He feels nothing.

The memory is still there, of course, but the emotions that had come with it all his life aren't there. He walks to the back door and places his palm on the handle.

Comfort.

Despite it all, there had always been a sense of comfort in the hut, strong on the good days, weak on the bad ones. To the Man, that comfort had always been the reason life with Pôpa hadn't been all bad like Mâmah had insisted it was.

That comfort—or the lack thereof—is the reason the Man still often lies awake at night wondering how Pôpa must have felt when he found the house empty the night after they left. And, though a hundred scenarios came to mind, the Man's pondering always ended on the one he considered the most plausible: that Pôpa had simply pretended nothing had happened, just as he had always done after shouting at him or Mâmah for no reason, or hurling another piece of the little pottery they had against the wall. *Yuz*, the Man would think. Probably Pôpa simply went to the market that morning, expecting Mâmah and the Boy to be back at night, sitting around the set dinner table and greeting him with apologetic smiles. It probably would have been one of the good nights, only there was no dinner and no apologetic smiles. Because they never returned.

And then?

Everything suggested that Pôpa never searched for them. Neither Mâmah nor the Boy ever heard from him again. So, *yuz*, maybe he had just gone on pretending, drowning the dark thoughts with "rice drink" and telling himself that an ungrateful wench and a

kazuum son, who thought he was more than just another have-not, weren't worth his breath anyway.

They had left? So what?

Good fucking riddance.

He'd just wait for the day they'd come back crawling, begging him to let them in, the Boy's back scarred from whip strikes he'd deservedly gotten as punishment for thievery, Mâmah's cunt sore and loose from the sailors she had to fuck to keep the Boy and her from starving.

He'd just wait.

How wrong he was. The Boy didn't steal and Mâmah didn't sell her body, something Pôpa would have known she'd never do had he truly known her. No, the Boy refused the "hand life had dealt him," refused to accept the place for "people like them," and instead seized fate by its fat fucking throat and made history, climbed Fortune Road at a pace that would later become the stuff of legends. He *did* sell the "lobsters." He *did* get caught. It did cost him almost all the money he'd earned. But instead of breaking him, the setback only steeled his resolve, made him learn from his mistakes, made him stand up from the dust and try again, with another approach, and, that time, it worked, didn't only bring him twice as much coin as the lobsters had, but set the foundation for what would later become an empire.

And yet—the comfort never returned.

Not after the Man joined the coalition, not after he and Mâmah moved into the biggest house the Jade District could offer, not after he met his wife and moved into the ziggurat on the top of the mountain. And, to the day she died, Mâmah never understood why the Man felt like something was lacking. For her, it was as she had said that night they walked away: Life was better without him.

A stray dog trots onto the porch. He pokes his snout into a mound of rubble, scouring it for food, then looks at the Man questioningly when he finds none.

The Man returns the look, then says: "Nothing's free."

The dog disappears into the thickets. *What a stupid thing to say.* He shakes his head. With a deep breath, the Man turns his attention back to the handle he has been holding for several minutes. His palms are wet. He presses it, and the door swings open.

It's all still there, buried under a thick layer of dust: The stone table in the center of the room, the palmwood chairs and shelves, even grandfather's fishing rod that Pôpa had treasured so much, as if some spell had protected the hut from being looted. It's all still there, except for the comfort, because the room is a corpse.

A carcass.

A thought forms in the back of the Man's head, hard and clear, almost as if it were a truth and not merely an assumption.

Pôpa never returned.

For a second, the Man wants to scream, slam his fist into the wall. He doesn't. A fog clouds his brain, has clouded it for the past three moons, and it smothers his feelings before his brain can translate them into action.

What's wrong with you?

"Fool," the Man says. "Fucking old fool."

He leaves.

Chapter 8

Dreams of the Dying

AGAAM WOKE THEM JUST BEFORE DAWN. To their surprise, Kawu had prepared breakfast for all four of them, a violet bean paste and a hearty soup with leaves and plantains. It tasted delicious.

Several times while they ate, Jespar noticed Kawu looking at him, but whenever their eyes met, the dreamwalker would drop his gaze. An hour after they had finished eating, Uunil-Yâr appeared on the horizon. Countless boats and ships populated the waters before it, fisher boats, trade vessels, galleons bearing the swords and the scarab flag of the Blue Islands Coalition. While the ship Jespar had arrived on three days before had to wait hours for admission only to be told to anchor in Port Vaju instead, Agaam got it at once when the man on the harbormaster's boat recognized him.

Soon after, the ship glided toward the busy piers of the Golden City.

When Jespar emerged from below decks with his knapsack slung over his shoulder, Kawu was leaning against the mast some steps from the door leading below, arms crossed. There was still no sign of the sun on the horizon, and the blanket of clouds stretching over the sky suggested it would stay hidden even after it rose.

"Oh," Jespar said when he noticed Kawu. "Hey."

"…Hello." Kawu rubbed the back of his neck. "May I… may I speak to you for a moment?"

"Um… Sure."

He sat down on a barrel next to the mast and tilted his head. "Yeah?"

Biting his lip, Kawu looked at his feet. "You don't feel it, do you?"

"Feel what?"

"My… presence."

"I can see that you're here," Jespar said with a grin. "If that's what you mean."

Kawu blushed. “No, that’s… you misunderstand. You remember the experience you had near my mother, don’t you?”

Unfortunately, Jespar thought.

“Yes.”

“Well, most dreamwalkers produce a certain kind of ‘resonance’ in people. For my mother, it comes in bursts, which results in those reality shifts for magically gifted people and extreme anxiety in others. I, on the other hand, tend to produce a kind of…” He exhaled, ran a hand through his black, disheveled hair. “I don’t know. People just normally feel uncomfortable around me, and you don’t seem to.”

“Oh… I see.” Jespar paused. “You’re right, though. I feel… different around you, but not in an uncomfortable way.”

“How then? If I may ask.”

As Jespar studied him to answer the question, two realizations came at once. First: What he had interpreted as curiosity at Kawu’s unusual person went deeper—it was a magnetic pull, the feeling that his and the dreamwalker’s life were, in some strange way, connected. Second: He found him attractive. Especially the latter surprised him. It had been a while since he’d last felt this way toward a man; like most people who felt drawn to both sexes, he rarely did so in equal parts. Some moons, he felt almost exclusively attracted to one sex, the other it flipped around. The past year, he hadn’t even thought of a man this way.

What about—

Okay, fair enough, there had been the balding boy in Itchmite Brothel, but Jespar was inclined to believe that the rice wine had played a considerable role in that.

This was different.

“I’m not sure how I feel,” Jespar said. “Curious, I guess? It’s hard to say.”

For a moment, Kawu said nothing and merely studied him, as if looking for dishonesty in Jespar’s face. Finally, the corners of his lips curled up in a faint smile. “I see.” He looked as though he wanted to add something, but then Lysia appeared in the cabin door.

Kawu bowed. “Excuse me,” he said and went to the stern, where he had stowed his things.

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An hour later, they were back in the anthill bustle of the Golden City, making their way through the harbor to the city outskirts, where they'd get fresh horses from a coalition trading post and ride back up Mount Uunil. Kawu, wearing his knapsack on his front, both arms slung around his chest, studied this new world with a mixture of wariness and awe. As Jespar had learned earlier, it was his first time outside Yuva.

According to Agaam, it was a busy day even by Uunil-Yâr standards, which he attributed to the upcoming *Sua Javaar*, the "Rain Celebration"—a two-day festival due two weeks from now, which marked the start of the rainy season that would nourish the island's parched grounds and, hopefully, provide for a rich harvest. Like every year, *Sua Javaar* brought thousands of people to Uunil and its capital, Aeterna minstrels and bards, merchants, fortune-seekers, and civilians from all over the archipelago wishing to witness the countless performances, marvel at the Starling fireworks, or simply drink and smoke their worries away with gallons of coalition-funded rice wine and barrels full of nightflower. This year, Agaam explained, the festival would be more lavish than ever before, so the city expected at least ten thousand visitors. Even though the old servant hadn't said it, Jespar understood the idea behind this: Probably the coalition hoped a drinking orgy with lots of music and free food would help to take the edge off the unrest the decree had spawned. While they were walking down a cramped alley, Lysia voiced Jespar's thoughts: "I hope the coalition doesn't just double the wine, but also the number of guards."

"I have no information on that," Agaam said.

Comforting, Jespar thought, hoping they'd have wrapped up their dreamwalking business and found the culprit before *Sua Javaar* took place. The festival was the reason neither of them was surprised to find the main road from the harbor into the Stone District clogged up by a crowd. Two sewer canals ran parallel to it, carrying the wastewater through the harbor and out into the ocean. It smelled accordingly.

"Don't think we're getting through here," Lysia said.

Agaam nodded and craned his neck to see over the heads of the crowd.

Jespar, on average a good head taller than most Kiléans, did the same. Strangely enough, a group of Blue Guards manned the gate. It neither looked like they were planning to let anyone through, nor did Jespar get impression that the majority of the crowd wanted to pass. Agitated voices rose over the ruckus.

"Something is going on up there," he said.

Agaam appeared to have come to the same conclusion. "Stay put. I'll talk to the guards."

He disappeared into the crowd, sidling through the throng in a way that almost seemed effortless. Jespar took a swig from his flask and offered it first to Lysia, who accepted it gratefully, then to Kawu. The dreamwalker didn't even notice him. His eyes were fixed straight ahead, and his arms were crossed, fingernails digging into his skin. A woman with short, black hair pushed past him, apologizing, and disappeared in the throng.

"You okay?" Jespar asked Kawu.

Kawu turned to face him. "Pardon?"

"Are you all right?"

"Oh… Yuz, thank you." He paused. "There's unrest."

"That's fairly obvious," Lysia said.

"No, it's… it's more than that. The people, they are…" He fumbled for the right word. "Fragile. Enraged."

Lysia made a thoughtful noise.

Jespar approached a middle-aged woman by the roadside, who observed the commotion from afar. She had a plump, honest face with cheeks so rosy it showed even on her tanned skin.

"Excuse me, *ma'saa*—do you know what's going on here?"

The woman gave him a quick once-over. "Someone washed up in the canals again."

"…You mean a corpse?"

The woman snorted. "I doubt a soak in that shit-water improves your health, so, yuz, a corpse. Some young girl, and she was carrying… at least that's what they think, she's hardly recognizable because apparently she's been floating around in the canals for moons. Now, I know what the guards will say, they'll say that it was probably just the usual story, you know,

the man seeds her and then leaves her, so she jumps from the mountain and kills herself, but the people are calling horseshit. So am I, for what it's worth."

Kawu walked up beside them. "So, you think someone murdered her, *ma'saa*?"

The woman gave him a curious glance. "You speak good Inâl."

"Thank you, *ma'saa*." His eyes didn't move.

"Sure. And, no, I don't think anybody murdered her—she killed herself, the guards got that right, but I bet my left hand it wasn't just over some heartbreak. She jumped for the exact same reason the other twenty-one folk who washed up in the sewers in the last fortnight did."

"Twenty-one people killed themselves in the last two weeks?" It was Lysia. There was shakiness in her voice Jespar hadn't heard from her before.

"That's what I said, girl. And those are only the ones we know about."

"Because of the decree," Jespar said.

The woman snorted. "I'm not an oracle, but me and those folk over there say it's likely. Wouldn't you? The man who washed up just two days ago, for example, had five kids and a wife to support, and because his job didn't earn him enough to feed them, he made coin on the side by plucking fruit from further up the coast and selling it, every coinless morning hours before the sun came up. Now that the coast belongs to some *kazuum* coalition bigwig, he not only can't do that anymore, but also has to pay for the drinking water he and the other folk from his village got from a nearby pond, because—guess what—the rivers and ponds *also* belong to some *kazuum* merchant." She spat. "You know what we called this when I was young? Thievery. Them magnates might as well have cut that man's throat themselves." She paused then shook her head. "I don't know who that girl was, but I sure as hell know I wouldn't want to be young with a bun in the oven these days. Might as well spare your kid the misery."

Before either of them had a chance to reply, Agaam returned. There was something absent and weary about his expression. He acknowledged the woman with a nod. "*Ma'saa.* Would you kindly give us a moment in private?"

The woman's face grew harder, but only for the batting of an eyelash. Then her lips curled in a smile and she returned the nod. "Of course. May you prosper." She walked off.

Agaam let out a sigh. "I talked to the guards. They are going to let us through."

"Great," Jespar said. "So, uhm... that woman. She told us that commotion is about a girl they found in the sewers. Is that true?"

"It is."

Lysia said, "She also told us that the people believe she killed herself because of the decree, like six others in the past two weeks."

"I wouldn't know about that, but it's certainly possible. Now, shall we go? We shouldn't keep Ma'saa Oonai and the counselor waiting longer than necessary."

Lysia narrowed her eyes but said nothing more. They followed Agaam through the angry crowd that, somehow, barely noticed them. Behind the line of guards protecting the Stone Gate, two purple-clothed figures wearing masks depicting mourning faces hoisted a shape wrapped in a purple cloth onto a cart. It had come loose at the bottom, exposing a sandaled, bloated foot.

Twenty-one suicides in two weeks.

Two weeks from now, most citizens would be celebrating the arrival of the rain.

Some wouldn't.

***

Once outside the city gates and on their horses, they rode fast. At noon, the double-winged gate opened before them. It was the first time Jespar saw the ziggurat in daylight, and it once again didn't fail to take his breath away. At night, there had been a mysterious, almost holy, air to it. Now, its thirty tiers of white and blue stone and the colossal statue crowning it were simply majestic and overwhelming. Jespar glanced at Kawu, who stood rooted to the spot, gaze fixed on the ziggurat.

"Impressive, huh?"

As if awaking from a trance, Kawu turned to face him. "It's just… I thought the stories were exaggerations."

"So did I."

"Ma'sae?" Agaam said. "You're expected."

They followed the old servant up the stairs and into the atrium, passing dozens of gardeners working on the hedges, trees, and flowerbeds, servants carrying goods in and out of the building and scrubbing the floors, and at least two dozen Blue Guards patrolling the ziggurat and the adjacent property. In the atrium, they found Enkshi, talking to a young woman with dirt or soot-stained hands—she was short, her hair black and wiry, and her ears were pointed like that of an Aeterna. A Starling. When she noticed their approach, she gave Enkshi a curt bow and left. The counselor wore a yellow and light blue robe that contrasted his onyx skin, an abundance of jewelry, and an admittedly, pleasant perfume. None of it could hide the exhaustion written across his face.

Noticing Kawu, his nostrils twitched. “Where’s the dreamwalker? Takana?”

Jespar and Lysia explained.

When they were done, Enkshi looked Kawu up and down, squinting as if looking for a fault. Kawu’s face remained perfectly expressionless throughout all this, his hands clasped behind his back. *People just feel uncomfortable around me.*

“He can be trusted,” Jespar said. “And it’s either him or no dreamwalking at all. Your choice.”

Enkshi flicked Jespar an annoyed look. Then he sighed and ran a hand over his shaved head. “Of course. I’m sorry, Ma’sao…”

“Kawu. Kawu Nākhani.”

“I’m sorry, Ma’sao Nākhani. The past days have been stressful.”

“I understand,” Kawu said.

Enkshi smiled politely. “Good. Well then, please follow me, all of you. Ma’saa Oonai has been eagerly awaiting your return. Agaam, you may withdraw to your quarters, but stay ready. We might require your services later.”

Agaam bowed.

Enkshi led Lysia, Jespar, and Kawu to the study on the twelfth tier, making non-committal conversation on the way. Jespar’s shoulder wound itched in the dull heat, but when he lightly pressed his fingers against it, he was surprised to find that, thanks to Lysia’s treatment and magic, the pain was almost gone.

Ma'saa Oonai was reading a letter when they entered. She wore a simple, armless black robe and three brass rings around each of her upper arms. Her hair was in a ponytail, and her face powdered to hide the shadows under her eyes.

She smiled. "Thank Morala, you're back. Did you bring her?"

"No," Enkshi replied. "But they did bring her son. They'll explain."

When they finished telling their story for the second time, Ma'saa Oonai's eyes rested on the young Makehu. There was an odd expression in them, the same discomfort Jespar had observed on Enkshi and Lysia, but paired with an almost motherly affection.

"If I may ask—how old are you, Kawu Nākhani?"

"I'm twenty-two, Ma'saa."

"And you're certain you can do what we ask of you? I don't know anything about your… craft, but it's a complicated mission." Oddly enough, the concern in her voice seemed to be for Kawu rather than the mission.

"If your husband does have dreams in this coma you described, then, yuz, I can enter them."

"Would you prefer to go by yourself or take Dal'Varek and Varroy with you as we suggested?"

Kawu cast a sidelong glance at Jespar. There was a short pause. "Six eyes see more than two and most of my concentration will be spent on keeping the three of us aware within the dream, so, yuz, if they agree, I would have them accompany me. However, even then I can't make any promises. Dreams are enigmatic at best, incomprehensible at worst, so we might find an answer, or we might find nothing."

"It will work," Ma'saa Oonai said. "I spent the last night in prayer, and Morala favors the cunning and the bold, so it will work." Her features relaxed. "In any case, thank you very much for agreeing to help—I'm certain we will both benefit from this agreement. And thank you, too, Dal'Varek and Varroy, you did great work. Zagash, were you aware the Scythe had so many supporters on Yuva?"

"I wasn't," Enkshi said. "But I'll inform General Duul and Sergeant Mâadira so they can decide on a course of action."

"Good." Ma'saa Nayima turned to Jespar, Kawu, and Lysia. "There's good news, too. A moon ago, we sent word to the Holy Order on Enderal and asked for a division of keepers to help us against the Scythe—a precaution more than anything, really; the Blue Guard can handle them, but who knows what these faithless have-nots are planning for *Sua Javaar*." She held up the letter she'd been reading. "This is the Holy Order's answer. It arrived this morning via black myrad courier."

Enkshi wrinkled his forehead. "What does it say?"

"Truchessa Dal'Veram is going to send a division that should be here within a fortnight."

"That's later than I had hoped."

"According to her, it's as fast as it was possible for them. We should be grateful they are sending us any help at all."

"…I suppose."

"If I may ask," Kawu said, "when you talk about the Holy Order, are you talking about the warriors of the Light-Born?"

*"*Yuz*,"* Nayima said. *"*But don't let this be of any concern to you. If all goes well, and I have faith it will, your business here will be done within the next couple of days." She put down the letter and folded her hands. "Speaking of which, we should waste no more time. Do you need anything to perform this ritual, and, if yuz, what?"

"It's a hypnosis, not a ritual. And all I need is a place for the three of us to lie down near the dreamer, your husband, an item of great personal value to him, and a pouch of *znah*—the latter will probably be the hardest to acquire. It's a very rare herb."

"We can use my marriage beads for the personal item. As for that herb, Agaam will find it, no matter how rare or how expensive. Zagash, tell Agaam to reach out to his contacts. That's all?"

"Yuz*, ma'saa*. That's all."

Ma'saa Oonai placed two fingers on the bridge of her nose. Then she nodded. "Then we will take care of the rest. You'll perform the ritual as soon as we get the herb, possibly this afternoon. Use the time to eat, wash, and rest. Zagash will inform you when everything is ready."

Enkshi showed them down into one of the many dining rooms, a high-ceilinged hall on the twentieth floor, and left them there with a stiff nod. When Jespar saw the dining table in the center, round and with six chairs, he wondered for the first time why Oonai had no offspring. A Makehu girl served them drinks and a plate of mixed Kiléan dishes, the hint of a frown on her face as she handed Kawu his cup. Jespar attempted to make conversation, but Lysia was unusually silent and Kawu busy gobbling down the food, all the while trying to conceal his obviously ravenous appetite. About the time they were done eating, Enkshi returned and informed them that the arrangements had been made and the *znah* would arrive in the early evening hours.

The counselor was about to leave when Lysia said, “May I ask a question?”

Enkshi turned around. “What?”

“That ‘accident’ in the Yuvanian mines twenty years ago,” Lysia said. “Is it true that it was orchestrated in order to shut down the worker movement?”

Jespar decided that, as many strengths as Lysia had, subtlety wasn’t among them. Enkshi narrowed his eyes. He gave Kawu a sidelong glance. “Is that what you’ve told them?”

Kawu said nothing.

“Is it true or not?” Lysia asked. “That’s all I want to know.”

Enkshi adjusted his rings, their silver contrasting his dark skin. “Well, let me put it this way: You’re right about the rockslide. It wasn’t an accident.”

Beside Jespar, Kawu compressed his lips.

“Then you admit…?” Lysia said.

“Not what you think,” Enkshi said. “Yuz, of course the worker movement from Yuva was a thorn in the coalition’s side… simply because their demands were so ludicrous. However, it had nothing to do with the accident. You’re aware that two families owned the nuvium mines on Yuva, yuz? Well, one of them, the Onêlyses, was at the brink of ruin, and forced to sell their shares of the Pit to the other family. Long story short, they couldn’t bear the shame.”

Jespar scrunched up an eyebrow. “You’re saying they blew up their own mine?”

“Correct, Dal’Varek, that’s what I’m saying, and there is plenty of evidence to prove it. Never underestimate the power of hurt pride.” He turned to face Lysia. “Now, you may choose to

believe me or not—knowing you, it'll probably be the latter. Yuz, only a fool would deny the coalition has stains on its robes, but Yuva isn't one of them. But, of course, that's not what the have-nots want to believe. If I can give you a piece of advice, remember that being poor doesn't make you a saint. Everybody tells his own version of the truth to fit their own pretty little narrative."

Interesting.

Lysia held Enkshi's gaze for a moment, then turned her attention back to her plate. "Okay."

"Good." He nodded toward the exit. "Now that that's settled, I expect you in the sleeping chambers two hours from now, washed and changed. You have a contract to fulfill."

***

Clouds still occluded the sun, so a rainy afternoon gloom filled the sleeping chamber's vestibule. It was silent except for the light wind outside. Gingerly, Jespar opened the double-winged door, slipped inside, and closed it behind him. It was dark inside, so Jespar's eyes took a moment to adjust. The room smelled better than it had yesterday, freshly aired and traced with incense, but the aroma of sickness still dominated. Kawu, Ma'saa Oonai, and Enkshi were by the First Magnate's bed, Kawu kneeling beside it, his palm resting on Jaaros Oonai's forehead. The dreamwalker wore only his woven reed skirt, no tunic and sandals, and a necklace hung around his neck, a crescent of bone spikes. Ma'saa Oonai and Counselor Enkshi watched over his shoulder. While Enkshi and Kawu didn't seem to have noticed Jespar, Ma'saa Oonai acknowledged him with a smile.

"They're still waiting for the old servant to bring the stuff," Lysia said. She was leaning against the column next to the door and spoke in a low voice. "And the boy is doing some kind of pre-examination." Just like Jespar, she wore fresh clothes, a white tunic that contrasted her tan and brown, loose linen trousers. Her hair was down and still wet from the bath.

"Okay," Jespar said, sitting on the edge of the nearby table. "How are you feeling?"

"Honest answer? Bloody nervous." She sighed. "Entering a dream… If I didn't know better, I'd say this is all some kind of stupid joke."

"Shouldn't you be used to that kind of thing? Considering magic is all about alternate realities and so on?"

"That's different. Eventualities are… detached, like shapes you see moving behind a foggy looking glass. It's all very abstract, even if you're a mage. You got your world, and you got the others that you use from time to time to light a candle, heal a cut, or something like that. Bottom line, the borders are… solid. Clearly defined." She shook her head. "Dreams, on the other hand… I don't know. They are part of our world, tiny little phantasms we create in our own heads at night. To think of them as actual worlds you can enter, but only in your mind because they're not physical… it's bloody strange if you ask me." She snorted, then gave Jespar an absent smile. "Stars burn me, I'm probably not making a lot of sense, am I?"

"Actually, you are."

The door opened and Agaam appeared carrying blankets and cushions under one arm. Ma'saa Oonai's face lit up as she saw him.

"Do you have it?"

Agaam nodded and produced a brown leather pouch from his pockets with his free hand. "It's not much and it was hard to get, but, yuz*, ma'saa.* I have it.*"*

A part of Jespar had been hoping for a different answer.

"Then we're ready," Enkshi said.

Over the next hour, Kawu explained the rules of *tuewa,* the realm of dreams. Three of them were paramount for the mission.

First was the fact that every conscious being had its own *tuewa,* its own dream world its mind traveled to when it slept, and each *tuewa* was found in the "In-Between," the ocean beneath the glacier lake Jespar had involuntarily seen in his seizure. Black and endless… a crossroads of minds.

"Let me get this straight," Lysia said. "You are talking about some kind of… collective mind?" They sat around a table near the canopy bed, a candelabra that Agaam had lit the sole source of light. Light rain fell against the closed shutters, its pattering faint and hypnotic.

Kawu nodded. "That is one way to say it, yuz."

"I'm not certain I understand," Ma'saa Oonai said. "Does this mean that our thoughts… connect with others when we fall asleep?"

"It does. Think of it as 'collective telepathy.' We perceive ourselves as individual entities, but the truth is, parts of our spirits are always connected, and that limbo between waking life and dream is when we briefly come together, albeit while unconscious. A shared hallucination, if you will."

Lysia gave a long sigh. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that's a lot of hogwash. How is it possible that no one except the Makehu know about this?"

Kawu turned to face her. "I don't know. Probably because knowing or not knowing this ultimately makes no difference for most people. As I said, this telepathy only lasts for a brief moment until we reach our own *tuewa,* and everyone, except for dreamwalkers, is unaware of it while it happens."

"But why?" Lysia asked. "Where's the point of all this?"

Kawu paused before answering, "Who knows? You might as well ask why we're born and why we die—it's simply how it is. I assume there are a lot of things we don't know about, and still they happen."

There was a short silence.

"Fair enough," Jespar said. "But if every living being temporarily enters that In-Between place when it dreams and it's a 'shared hallucination,' wouldn't that mean that ocean would have to be full of people? I didn't see anyone when your mother gave me that 'seizure' back in Yuva, not even Lysia, though she was standing right beside me."

"Again, because the In-Between is infinite. Physical proximity when falling asleep puts you closer in the In-Between, but almost never within sight."

"… I see."

Not really. Sure, he understood the words and the theory, but did he *actually* grasp the meaning behind them? No. It was a bit like when he had first heard about the concept of alternate realities that made magic possible, or when on a starlit night, his foster father had let him (and her) look through his Qyranian telescope and Jespar first realized how small and insignificant things must have looked from up there.

"All right," Lysia said, "so we enter a shared hallucination when we fall asleep. But how do we get inside our actual dreams? The ones we remember?"

"That happens by itself. Think of it as us sinking until our spirits guide us to our *tuewa* somewhere down in that ocean, and our sleeping minds automatically take us to them. Which is where I come in—for us to reach Oonai's dreams, we need to be aware while we traverse the In-Between. I will hypnotize you and, by doing so, keep you lucid so we can find his *tuewa* together."

Cold settled in the nape of Jespar's neck. "We're going to be aware while we sink down that ocean?"

"It's the only way. Also, remember, everything that happens in the In-Between or in our dreams is ultimately just an elaborate illusion and can't harm us physically."

But mentally? He kept quiet.

"The second rule: To the dreamer, the dream is reality," Kawu explained. "The sleeping spirit doesn't know it's dreaming. Except for rare exceptions, it thinks everything that's happening is real."

Rare exceptions such as yours truly, Jespar thought.

"Which directly ties into the final rule: If the narrative of a dream breaks, the sleeper awakes. This is irrelevant for normal dreams, but important for our undertaking. A dream," Kawu said, "always follows an internal logic, a narrative, and that narrative has to be respected."

"So," Lysia said, "once we enter Oonai's dream, we have to play the part?"

"It's not so much about 'playing the part' than about making certain Oonai's dream doesn't recognize us as outsiders. The moment this happens, we've lost, because the dream will expel us and, possibly, not allow us to enter if we try again. Not to mention the immense mental exhaustion we'll all feel after the journey." He gave what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "But, if you follow my guidance, we'll be fine. Staying within the narrative isn't hard if you don't do anything foolish. Extracting information, on the other hand, is a challenge."

Enkshi, who had been listening quietly, spoke up. "What you're saying is that you cannot simply approach Master Oonai in his dream, tell him he's asleep, and ask him what happened, correct?"

"Absolutely not," Kawu said. "That would be the quickest way to propel us back into reality."

Ma'saa Oonai let out a sigh and leaned back in her chair, massaging her temples as if helping her brain to process her new knowledge.

Jespar drank from the water Agaam had brought him, wishing it was something stronger. "In other words: We're spies in a dream."

***

Lysia and Jespar sat cross-legged on the blankets Agaam had laid out for them. Based on Kawu's instructions, Jespar wore his daggers, Lysia her baton. They were facing the bed, where the dim light shrouded the First Magnate's emaciated shape in obscurity. He looked stiff and lifeless, more like a wax figure than man. Ma'saa Oonai, holding a wooden box, and Enkshi stood some arm-lengths away, as if trying to keep a safe distance; Agaam was behind Jespar and Lysia, so motionless Jespar had to remind himself of his presence.

Kawu knelt down in front of them, buttocks resting on his heels, insteps on the ground, and handed them two cups of dark liquid. *Znah.* Jespar brought it to his nose. It smelled good, sweet and rich.

"Please drink."

Jespar sipped. When he found that it tasted as good as the smell suggested, he downed it in one go.

Lysia looked uncertain. *"*Remind me, what exactly does this do?"

*"*It numbs your psyche," Kawu said. "As I said, my hypnosis will keep you conscious while we traverse the In-Between, but as you're not used to this state, there's a high risk you would panic without some kind of help."

"So, it's a droga."

*"*A sedative, yuz. But it will let off once we're inside the dream." Seeing Lysia was still reluctant, he said, "Even if you were somehow able to stay calm in the In-Between, *znah* also changes how we perceive time, which will make things a lot more pleasant for you. It might take us days or even weeks to find Oonai's dream."

"Weeks?" Enkshi said. He still sat at the table, observing them with an expression best described as resigned skepticism. "We don't have that much time."

"Here, it won't be as long," Kawu replied. "In the In-Between, time doesn't exist at all, and it passes differently in *tuewa.* Thirty minutes out here might be a year in a dream, or even more."

Ma'saa Oonai cast a worried glance at her husband.

A soothing warmth spread in Jespar's head, like liquid honey coating his thoughts. The effect reminded him of nightflower, but a lot stronger and without the sleepiness.

Kawu turned back to Lysia. "You will simply have to trust me."

Lysia hesitated. Then she emptied the contents of the cup.

Kawu nodded at Ma'saa Oonai. "The beads, please."

The mistress of the house took a necklace from the wooden box she was holding, marble-shaped gemstones in different colors strung onto a chord. She gave it to Kawu. "Please be careful."

"I will." Kawu took the marriage beads and studied them. "Your husband loves you." He said it without emotion, as though stating a fact.

Ma'saa Oonai smiled weakly. "I know."

"Then we can start?" Enkshi asked.

"We can."

Following Kawu's instructions, Lysia and Jespar straightened their backs, folded their hands in their laps, and concentrated on the marriage beads that lay between them. The droga was now in full bloom. Kawu bent forward and touched Lysia's forehead with his outstretched index and middle finger.

"Sleep."

Her eyes fell shut. Agaam, who stood behind them, immediately grabbed her under the shoulders and eased her down on the blanket. Kawu turned to Jespar.

Two thoughts came when he felt the dreamwalker's fingertips on his forehead.

The first: This was the first time they'd made physical contact.

The second: He'd done a lot of peculiar things in his time on the road, but if there were trophies to be won for strangeness, this one was by far the top candidate.

"Sleep."

By f—

He plummeted into darkness.

***

The water enfolded him.

It was silent, cold, and dark, except for faint rays of light coming through the iced water surface far above him, but the light was fading. Because he sank.

The In-Between.

I'm dreaming.

The clarity of these thoughts surprised him. He knew the state of being lucid within a dream from his recurring nightmare, but this was different—yes, he *was* aware during the Trial, but there he was reduced to being a witness: forced to feel, unable to act, a prisoner in his own mind.

Here, he was free.

He was himself.

Surrounded by the dark water, he tried to wave his hand. It moved. He kicked his legs. They obeyed. He noticed how, though his lungs worked, neither air nor water entered his nostrils, and how his body didn't miss it.

Interesting.

Even though his situation gave plenty of reason to panic, he somehow felt completely at ease, calm and collected, as if his sinking into an endless ocean that supposedly represented the border between dream and reality was the most normal thing in the world—according to Kawu, it was. The *znah,* Jespar realized. Whatever negative emotions he would have ordinarily felt, the droga drowned them in a peaceful lethargy.

A smile formed on his lips as he sunk deeper and deeper.

He didn't know where he was going.

He didn't care.

Someone touched him on the shoulder. Slowly, as if awaking from a trance, Jespar turned his head. Kawu. He hovered less than an arm-length from him, the bone necklace floating around

his neck like fragments of a shattered vase. Jespar attempted to speak, but Kawu merely shook his head and beckoned him to follow. Jespar did.

They swam, seemingly without direction, downward, upward, left and right, through the monotonous blackness. The light from the surface was almost gone when they found a shape floating in the vastness. Lysia. She had the same look of numbed amazement on her face that Jespar must have had on his own. Kawu signaled them both to follow.

Time passed while the dreamwalker guided them through the ocean, and it felt as unreal and fluid as the water surrounding them. When Kawu finally stopped, Jespar couldn't tell how long they had been going, whether it had been seconds, hours, or days.

When Kawu came to a sudden stop and his fists clenched, Jespar's *znah*-drugged spirit didn't realize what it meant. Kawu faced them, his eyes wide open.

Shock?

Fear?

A current gripped Jespar.

Before he even understood what was happening, it had already torn him away from the group. Finally, panic broke through the false serenity of the *znah*. He tried to escape the pull. He swam, kicked, but it was pointless. Like flotsam in a cyclone, the current tossed and spun him through the water, smothering all sense of orientation. A figure swept past him and caught his ankle, he looked, it was a corpse in gray robes, the Corpse, his bloated lips pressed in that look of contempt and shame and disappointment, Jespar screamed, but there was no sound, he kicked at the rotten face but missed, and a silhouette appeared below them—the trial hall encased in a sphere of water—and he saw it all, the jury, the spectators, the guards, the dais.

His dream,

But, then, the current changed direction. It ripped him away from the Corpse, once again flung and spun him through the darkness until there was another water sphere coming at him at breakneck speed.

He opened his mouth in a silent scream.

And smashed through the bubble.

Briefly, he hung suspended in mid-air. There was no more water, just moist air, and the sphere through which he had entered just a millisecond ago was now solid stone. His clothes and skin were as dry as on a summer's day.

He crashed down on the stone floor.

For what must have been minutes he just lay there, his breath coming fast and shallow while he tried to comprehend what had just happened. As Kawu had promised, the effect of the *znah* seemed to have let up completely upon entering the dream. Slowly but surely, he put together the pieces.

At first, all had gone as intended—Jespar had entered the In-Between, and, through Kawu's presence, remained lucid. Kawu had found first him, then Lysia, and had started to guide them to what should have been Jaaros Oonai's *tuewa*, his dream world.

Then something had gone wrong. A riptide had torn them from each other, and tried to drag Jespar into his own nightmare until, for some reason, it shifted direction and tossed him into another dream instead.

Oonai's?

Deciding that he wouldn't find out whilst lying on the flagstone, Jespar moaned and got to his knees. His vision was blurry, and his head swam but other than that, he felt fine. Rubbing his eyes to clear the fog before them, he looked around.

And froze.

The room was filled with the carcasses of pigs, headless, skinned, and suspended from chains. The smell of blood permeated the air, mingled with the aromas of spices, cabbage, and flour. It was dark except for a cone of light falling through a half-open door at the opposite side of the room.

A storage chamber?

Jespar felt for his daggers. Thankfully, his brain—or the In-Between, or whatever weird law dictated the rules in this place—had projected his weapons into the dream, their steel hilts reassuring under his palms. When the question what good an immaterial weapon would do in an immaterial world stirred at the back of his brain, he ignored it.

What now?

Wake up.

Of course. The most reasonable thing to do was to wake up in the ziggurat, review the situation with Kawu and the others, and try again. How, though? His thoughts raced, until he remembered Kawu's words: *Break the narrative.*

That was it. All he had to do was to signal the dream he was an outsider, and it would reject him.

"I'm dreaming," Jespar said aloud.

Nothing.

"I'm in a dream. I want to wake up."

The same result. He tried several other things, from squeezing his eyes shut and envisioning himself bolting awake, and even pinching himself, but none of them worked.

Oonai.

In all likelihood, Jespar couldn't "break the narrative," because the dreamer wasn't even present to notice he was doing it. Which, in return, meant one thing: To get out, he had to find Oonai or Kawu.

And if he managed neither?

Then, Ma'sao Dal'Varek, you're trapped.

Cold formed in the pit of his stomach.

"Okay," he said. "Okay."

He was waist-deep in shit, fair enough, but if there was one thing that would raise waist-deep to neck-deep, it would be to let fear get the better of him.

Okay.

You got this.

He went to the door, carefully sidling his way through the suspended carcasses, ignoring the smell of the bloody, salted meat forcing its way into his nostrils. Halfway through, his fear had let off a little. That he felt so clear and in control helped: Had he not known that his real body was sound asleep in First Magnate Jaaros Oonai's sleeping chambers, he would have found it hard to believe that what he was experiencing wasn't reality. Less than ten arm-lengths separated him from the door when a shriek pierced through the silence. Jespar whirled around,

drawing both daggers. One of the pig carcasses slowly swung from side to side, blood trickling from its decapitated neck.

What the—

The blood and the swinging stopped.

Jespar gripped his daggers tighter and walked backward to the door, keeping his eyes on the carcass.

Just a dream.

Whatever happened next, it wasn't real. He was safely in the world of matter, *akhara* or whatever the Makehu called it, and no matter what happened to him down here, no dream could physically harm the living.

Very convincing, he thought. *Very convincing.*

He'd taken three steps when there was another shriek, this one twice as loud. It came from another carcass, one that hung just a few arm-lengths away from him. Like a grotesque pendulum, it swung back and forth, the bloodied flesh bumping into the other carcasses around it. Blood spurted from its neck, forming a puddle beneath it.

Jespar stepped back. The headless carcass cried again and the swinging grew faster.

Just a dream. Another step back, toward the door. When the next sound came from a carcass right behind him, his blood froze.

Why?

Because he finally understood where the noises came from. Not from a disembodied voice, not from the pigs' mauled throats, but from inside the carcasses themselves.

And they were human.

Four corpses set in motion at once, swinging so hard that their bodies smashed into the ceiling, shrieking and wailing, spraying fountains of blood all over the room. Simultaneously, their bellies *shifted,* stretched, bulged.

Jespar spun around and ran for the door. All the corpses were morphing now, until one of them right next to Jespar tore open and a little thing fell to the floor from inside them, crying, covered in blood, and crawling on all fours. Jespar reached the door, flung himself through, and

smashed it shut behind him. He had just enough time to catch a glimpse at one of the creatures from the bellies of the corpses.

Embryos.

Behind the door, the cacophony ceased.

His breath coming in fits, Jespar stared at the metal door, almost convinced that it would spring open any moment.

It didn't.

"… Fucking hell." He wiped the sweat off his forehead. The tips of his boots were tinged with blood, the metallic smell still in his nostrils and the cries and shrieks of the children in his eardrums.

"Fucking hell."

He turned around and studied his surroundings. Before him lay a long hallway. Even though it was tinted by a pale, violet light falling through its right side, there was no mistaking the white stone walls, the marble floor, and the blue and gold rug that ran down the length of the corridor. The ziggurat.

Good news, he thought. *You found the place.*

Bad news: It's a godsdamned nightmare.

He went to search for Kawu and Lysia.

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Jespar wasn't surprised to find that the carcass-born toddlers were far from the only horrors the dream had to offer. After taking a right turn at the end of the hallway, Jespar came into a section lined with row after row of portraits, supposedly depicting Jaaros and Nayima Oonai's ancestry. At least that must have been their purpose in the waking world.

Here, the figures in the frames were deformed, mockeries of humanity, with limbs and bones stretched and bent in impossible angles, necks as long as arms, and arms that were as thin as fingers. Eyeballs sat in sockets placed too far apart, the heads equine and angled, the mouths placed a finger-length above the chin.

And they moved.

Slowly they pressed their hands against the inside of the paintings as if trying to escape, their eyes following Jespar as he walked by and their mouths opening and closing in soundless words and silent screams. His daggers drawn and his blood hot in his temples, Jespar placed one foot in front of the other. When the paintings were finally behind him, he had to wipe the hilts of his daggers against his tunic. They were so drenched in sweat they had almost slipped from his palms.

When one corridor finally led him outside onto a colonnade, he realized that the Uunil of Oonai's dream was as dead as the inside of his palace. It was a no man's land, gray, ashen soil as far as the eye could see, not even the skeleton of a palm or a tree or a shrub to remind Jespar of the real world from which this landscape had been formed. A moon purple as frostbitten limbs shone through a cover of clouds, and the dry air smelled like ash.

Jespar pushed on, shouting Kawu's and Lysia's names, but he found nothing. Following a hunch, he went to the study in the ziggurat garden, but it was deserted and decayed. A silhouette in a pale yellow dress squatted over a flowerbed before it and shoveled gray earth into an empty planter. Jespar approached her warily.

"Hello?"

The woman turned her face. It was blank, smooth as a marble except for a pointy nose and a thin mouth. Charcoal was smeared all over her skin. Jespar stepped slowly back, the tips of his daggers pointed at the eyeless woman. She didn't follow.

He tried the dining hall where he, Lysia, and Kawu had eaten, and found two corpses instead, seated around the table and quietly moving their cutlery over the empty plates. One of them wore three prayer rings on each of her upper arms, the other one an abundance of rings on the rotten fingers. Though they all turned their heads to Jespar when he entered, none of them reacted. They just stopped moving their cutlery and looked at him, worms creeping over their eyeballs.

For a moment, Jespar held their gaze, his brain struggling to find an adequate reaction to what it was seeing. At last, Jespar slowly turned around and left.

*"*I'm dreaming," Jespar repeated again and again, but it didn't take long before the horror that had begun to grow in his chest in the storage chamber had swollen to a paralyzing cloud

billowing through his psyche. Outside, he hurried up the main stairs, and sat down on the steps halfway up the ziggurat. For the first time, two thoughts that had been lurking in the depths of his skull since he entered the dream made their way to the surface.

In dreams, time is relative.

What if there's no way out?

They spawned a third: *What if I'm alone?*

What if, by some unlucky coincidence, he was indeed the only one who had actually made it into Oonai's dream? What if Kawu and Lysia were back in reality, in *akhara*, telling Ma'saa Oonai and Enkshi about the tragic event, Jespar's body motionless on the blanket next to the man he'd been hired to save? Sure, they might come for him again, but if five minutes in waking life could equal five years in a dream, what—

There was a whimper. Jespar started.

Another.

It was hard to tell, but the voice seemed to be coming from somewhere down the column-lined walkway running along the front edge of the ziggurat. Jespar drew a deep breath.

He stood and followed the noise.

The whimpering grew louder as he moved down the walkway, the vastness of the dead island backdropping the balustrade to his right, door after door to his left. The howling of the wind mixed with the sobs and moans. Finally, Jespar came to a halt before a metal door. It looked just like the others leading inside the ziggurat, but the voice seemed to come from behind it.

Jespar reached for the handle.

Drew a breath.

Opened it.

A sickening smell hit him, sweet, metallic, pungent. The room was cramped and dark, lit only by a brass chandelier, half of its candles burnt down. Cupboards and shelves covered the crude stone walls, packed with books, herbs, and medical paraphernalia—vials, instruments, and bandages.

After the split second it took his brain to translate what he was seeing into context and meaning, Jespar simply froze.

At the opposite side of the room, Jaaros Oonai sat in a chair. His face was all angles and bones, his skin full of scabs and blisters, his hair and beard greasy and disheveled. The Magnate's Crown was on his head, but it was rusty and five of the spikes were broken. A man in orange robes knelt before him, both hands sunk in a head-sized hole in the First Magnate's stomach. Blood spurted from the wound, spraying all over the man's robes and soaking his arms, but both the man and Jaaros Oonai were impassive. The First Magnate's eyes were wide open, spittle running from his lips as they formed the moaning Jespar had heard from outside.

The orange-robed man pulled out his hands, cupping a clump of meat—

A liver

It's a liver

—in them. He put it onto a table beside him, next to a mound of other organs.

Jespar vomited.

When he had emptied the contents of his stomach on the flagstones, he coughed, his heart racing and pulse throbbing, not daring to lift his eyes, thinking that this made no sense, none of this made any sense, none of this was happening, none—

He threw up again.

When it was all out, he forced himself to look up.

The orange-robed man had pulled another piece of flesh from the First Magnate's insides, whose face remained as lethargic as it had been.

A fist-sized tumor protruded from Jaaros's head, just above his left ear.

Tumor?

"Gods," Jespar whispered. "Gods."

It wasn't a tumor—it was an insect. Its body black and wrinkly, it expanded and contracted, like a leech sucking blood from its host. Five tiny dots—eyes—were set in the outward-facing section of its body, finger-long feelers grew out between them and twisted and writhed slowly. Stumps poked out on either side of the insect's bulbous body, hooking into Oonai's scalp.

For a while, Jespar simply stared at the grotesque scene, at the medicus, at the magnate, at the creature on his neck. Then he turned around and left.

Gently, as if trying not to disturb a sleeping child, he pushed the door shut behind him. He went over to the balustrade and leaned his elbows on it, eyes fixed at the sky. Despite its unnatural color, something about it soothed him, probably that it was the only remotely normal thing in this godsdamned *fucking* nightmare, an anchor for his sanity.

It's not real.

None of this is real.

Jespar made a frustrated noise, ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

Ultimately, he had two options: Continue searching for Kawu and Lysia or take matters into his own hands by breaking the narrative and propelling himself back into reality. As much as a part of him preferred option one, he doubted aimlessly scouring the horror cabinet of the ziggurat for another indefinite amount of time had a positive effect on his sanity—not to mention there was a considerable chance Kawu and Lysia hadn't made it into this *tuewa* in the first place. Which left him with option two.

Oonai.

Whichever way he looked at it, the way out of the dream, and maybe even to the information they were after, led back inside that room. But how? The First Magnate hadn't even seemed aware of Jespar, so how was he even supposed to get him to listen, let alone talk to him?

When the idea came, it was crisp and clear.

Jespar wiped his palms against his trousers, then took a deep breath.

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The medicus had enlarged the hole in Oonai's stomach, four flaps of skin folded outward and held in place by brackets pinned into Oonai's robe. Having removed most of the organs inside, the medicus now seemed in the process of severing and extracting the muscle strands of the external oblique.

One dagger drawn, Jespar went to the medicus, yanked his head up by his hair, and cut his throat. There was no struggle, no resistance. The medicus simply stopped moving while the red liquid spurted from the wound, spraying into Oonai's wound and his already blood-soaked, dark blue robes. He collapsed without making a sound.

Jespar looked at the corpse for a second then pushed him to the side with his boot. Oonai ceased his muttering, the insect on his neck expanding and contracting. Still there was no recognition in the First Magnate's eyes, he simply gazed straight ahead as if looking at some distant landscape.

"Jaaros Ismiraael Oonai," Jespar said.

There was no reaction.

He lightly pressed the tip of his boot against the First Magnate's knee. Nothing.

The bug. It was just as he had figured: Whatever that thing was, it caused Oonai's coma, it caused this nightmare.

He'd found the "curse."

Jespar exhaled heavily. Then he grabbed the First Magnate's head, tilted it to the side so that the fat insect was fully exposed, and drove his dagger deep inside its black, slimy body.

Years back, during the civil war in Nehrim, a healer of the Gallowmen had requested Jespar's help after a skirmish. Another mercenary's leg had been caught under a battering ram's wheel and crushed into a bloody pulp, and the healer's assistant had gone missing. Jespar obeyed and held the mercenary, barely more than a boy, in place while the healer cut off the leg with a bone saw.

The scream Jaaros Oonai let out the moment the knife went into the insect's flesh was the same. At the same time, the insect's feelers shot out and closed around Jespar's wrist.

A shock raced up his arm, into his shoulder, up the side of his neck, and finally deep into his skull.

Pain exploded.

The world went red.

Memories.

A burning house, Jespar and *her*, trembling hands, disbelief, screams.

Bodies on stakes, familiar faces, all the skin gone except for their faces.

His brothers dead, his father dying, pale blue eyes staring at him.

Is that sadness?

Or disappointment?

The world shifts.

More memories, but not his own.

A house on a mountain, the sky orange and purple.

He and a woman in a bright room, talking.

He and a woman, walking between walls of green.

Anger.

Shame.

You can't stop me.

Every sin leaves a mark on us.

I can fix this.

I can clear my name.

Darkness.

Chapter 9

Leech

COLD. Every pore, every bone, every sinew, the kind of cold that took your fingers in a blizzard, the kind you'd find in the flesh of a corpse buried under an avalanche.

Jespar moaned, but all that came out was a croak. He tried to open his eyes, but didn't succeed before the third try. A milky film blurred his sight, making it impossible to see.

Voices.

Voices nearby, two, but he didn't understand what they were saying. One of them came closer.

"…par?"

Cold.

Jespar slipped away.

When he opened his eyes again, the cold was down to a chill, and the blurry fog was gone. The first thing he noticed was how funny the sky looked. Dark. Purple.

Oonai.

The bug.

Panic flooded him. He was still inside the nightmare, trapped, unable to move, unable to awaken. Someone ran toward him, and he instinctively reached for his daggers, but they weren't there.

"Jespar!" The figure squatted before him and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Jespar, for the gods' sakes, calm down!"

A breath passed before Jespar finally recognized the face.

"Ly-Lysia?"

Lysia sighed with relief. "That's my name."

Another figure came into sight. "*Kweh…* You're awake."

Kawu knelt down beside him, and placed his palm on his forehead. What was left of the chill vanished and his nerves calmed. For some breaths he didn't move, his eyes darting from Kawu and Lysia like a trapped animal, his breath slow and heavy. Finally, he let out a long sigh and tried to reorient himself.

He was in the column-lined walkway, back resting against a wall right next to the metal door of what he presumed was the medicus's room.

The bug.

His eyes shot down his right arm to five red dots on his wrist, supposedly where the insect's feelers had touched him. *What happened?* The last thing he remembered was driving his dagger into the parasite's black, glistening carapace. Then, darkness.

Wincing, he attempted to stand, but dizziness overcame him, and he almost lost his footing.

Lysia was immediately at his side and supported him. "Easy."

Jespar gave a weak nod and drew a deep breath. Slowly, the strength returned to his limbs, and his mind cleared.

"…All right," he said. "What on Vyn happened?"

Lysia gave him hollow smile. "Long story. But I guess we found the cause of the coma."

Jespar glanced at the sealed metal door of the sick room. "The insect."

"The dream-eater," Kawu said. "It's a parasite, and this is his creation." He walked to the balustrade and rested his elbows on it, the dead island stretching out beyond the balustrade. "The

current that separated us in the In-Between… I assume it was a sort of defense mechanism of the dream-eater to keep intruders out of the dream. I neutralized it, but, by then, it had already swept you away."

"I see." Jespar rubbed his forehead, his skin feeling damp and cold. "There… there was someone in the current. A character from my dreams."

Kawu nodded, as if Jespar had confirmed his suspicions. "Probably a hallucination… an element of your own *tuewa* that seeped over into the In-Between. See, when the dream-eater's defenses temporarily broke my hypnosis on you, your mind proceeded to do what it would have normally done while in the In-Between."

"Guide me into my own dream?"

"*Yuz.* I stopped the current in time, but you were too far out for me to find you, so I took Ma'saa Varroy and myself to Oonai's dream, where I knew the hypnosis would take you eventually. But it seems you came here before us, and when we found you in that room you were unconscious. You tried to kill the parasite, didn't you?"

"…I thought it might get me out of here."

"Understandable, but you're extremely lucky to have survived—it's impossible to kill a dream-eater in *tuewa*."

Jespar's eyes wandered back to the marks on his arms. By now, they had almost faded. "But I'm fine now, right? I survived."

Kawu paused. "*Yuz*. I think you are."

"Speaking of that bug," Lysia said, "what on Vyn is that thing anyway? And how is it responsible for this?"

"That's a long answer." He turned to face them. "I'll explain everything as best as I can, but not here. We've been in *tuewa* longer than it's good for your minds, and it's time to leave."

Jespar let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "So, you can take us out of here?"

"*Yuz.* I had to wait for you to regain consciousness, but now there's no more reason for us to stay."

"Music to my ears," Lysia said. She glanced at the metal door behind them. A faint whimper came from inside. "What about the First Magnate? Do we just leave him here?"

Kawu said, "We have to. There's nothing else we can do."

***

Leaving a dream through the In-Between was easier than entering it. There was only one way to go, and that was up. As he had done in reality, Kawu placed his index and middle finger on Jespar's forehead, only this time he didn't fall asleep.

The world melted.

Like an aquarelle submerged into water, the wall behind him, the ceiling above his head, and the scenery behind the balustrade first blurred, then morphed into the sphere of water he had entered through. Warmth prickled in Jespar's limbs and head.

"The *znah*," Kawu said as Jespar's eyes widened. Though he was standing right in front of him, his voice sounded muffled. "It's taking effect again. Don't worry, I'll guide you."

Jespar wanted to answer, but, instead, he found himself smile. Everything was light, untethered, and he was the seed of a dandelion caught in an updraft. His feet left the ground, and he was floating toward the ceiling, toward the edge of the water sphere, behind which the dark ocean extended into the endless distance.

Before he knew it, they were back in the blackness of the In-Between, Kawu guiding them as they ascended back to reality. Not much later, the ocean's frozen surface was coming at them. A befuddled grin on his face, Jespar stretched out his hand, reaching for the ice.

Before his palm could touch it, he awoke.

***

"So, you're telling us that Master Oonai has a parasite," Enkshi said. "A brain parasite."

They were gathered around the First Magnate's bed. Ma'saa Oonai was by her husband's side, holding his hand with a faraway look on her face. Jespar, Lysia, and Kawu, with mugs of steaming tea Kawu said would help with the dizziness, sat on chairs they'd moved over from a nearby table. Counselor Enkshi stood by the window, leaning against the sill. The shutters were open, and the fresh night air mingled with the smell of sickness and scented candles. When he awoke, Enkshi told them barely forty minutes had passed during the hours and hours they'd spent in the In-Between and Oonai's dream.

"I've never encountered a dream-eater before," Kawu said, "but that creature we saw inside the dream fits the description. So, *yuz,* I think your master is infected by a brain parasite."

Enkshi snorted. "And here I thought things couldn't get any more absurd."

"Is it that absurd?" Lysia said. "If you ask me, a brain parasite causing hallucinations actually seems like a fairly grounded thing compared to supernatural comas, collective subconsciousnesses, and trips into other people's dreams."

Smiling faintly, Enkshi massaged his temples. "That's one way to look at it."

Ma'saa Oonai, who had remained silent while Kawu recounted the events, spoke up. "Very well, so a parasite is behind this. That's both a relief and a shock." Her eyes fixed on Kawu. "Tell us what you know about it. What, by the gods, *is* a dream-eater, what is it doing to my husband, and, most importantly, how do we get it… out of him?"

Kawu's eyes drifted off, the way they always did before he spoke, as if he were making room to carefully consider and reflect on every word first. "Death by dream-eater was an execution method," he finally said. "One that the dreamwalkers of the *Sakhi*, the Makehu tribe that used to inhabit Uunil, performed. It was the highest form of capital punishment, which the Elders only administered for the most heinous crimes."

Lysia rubbed her scar. "I didn't know there were different tribes."

"There were, but that was a long time ago. About, I believe, seven-hundred years before the colonization, eight of the ten tribes united, and that's also when 'death by dream-eater' was abolished."

"How come?" Ma'saa Oonai asked.

Kawu drank from his tea. "Because it was considered too cruel. Which leads me to your other question, Ma'saa Oonai: A dream-eater is a parasite that befalls humanoids, so, in other words, the races of Vyn. It enters its host through their nostrils or eyes, settles in their brains, and releases a secretion there that slowly plunges the host into a coma where it spins a perpetual nightmare to feed off their suffering."

Enkshi turned away from the window. "Did you say, 'feed off their suffering?'"

"I did. Negative emotions—pain, sorrow, fear, and anger—are to the dream-eater what blood is to a leech—that's why it creates this ongoing nightmare, where it confronts the host with their worst traumas and fears. At the same time, the dream-eater's secretions keep the host just alive

enough for the brain to continue functioning. That symbiosis might go on for several months to a year, until the dream-eater's secretion can't keep the host alive any longer and they die." Noticing the look on Ma'saa Oonai's face, Kawu lowered his eyes. "Forgive me for speaking so frankly."

Ma'saa Oonai made a vague hand gesture. "It's all right. You said the coma doesn't happen right after the infestation, correct?

"Yuz."

"Does it… does it also cause a change in personality?"

Hesitating, Kawu said, "…I believe so."

"I see." Ma'saa Oonai turned her face to her husband. Some of his long black hair hung into his face—she brushed it back behind his ears, several strands sticking to her fingers. She wiped her hand against the side of the bed. Then she turned back to Kawu, her expression strangely neutral.

"What I don't understand—and please don't misinterpret this as an accusation—is why you didn't think of this sooner. From what you described, my husband's symptoms fit perfectly."

There was a pause before Kawu answered, "Admittedly, because the idea never even crossed my mind. As I said, dream-eaters are supposed to be extinct, and the only reason I know about them at all is because dreamwalkers still pass down the knowledge from generation to generation. When my mother told me, she said it as if it were just an old scare story." He rubbed the back of his neck. When no one commented on this, Kawu continued, "Either way, I believe we digress. What matters now is that, evidently, some dream-eaters survived and one of them infected your husband."

Ma'saa Oonai gave a weak nod. "You said that only a dreamwalker can put that parasite into a person, correct?"

"Not quite," Kawu replied. "If I remember correctly, a dreamwalker is necessary for a controlled infestation, but only for the imprinting."

"Imprinting?" Enkshi asked.

"*Yuz*—a dream-eater has to be imprinted upon a person before it's set free, otherwise it would simply jump at the first potential host it finds. Think of it as a… a mental link between a human and the parasite, which binds the dream-eater to the human's will and gives the human the ability to command it. According to my mother, the dreamwalkers performed the imprinting on themselves in most cases, because they were also the executioners, but in theory…"

"Anyone could have put that thing into Oonai's head," Lysia said.

Kawu nodded.

With a grim smile, Enkshi said, "Well, at least we have our answer. This 'curse' *was* an assassination attempt after all, just as we suspected."

"And they want to see him suffer," Ma'saa Oonai said, her eyes glassy. "It's the only explanation, isn't it? If the murderers' goal was to simply kill my husband, they wouldn't have needed this creature."

"I suppose so," Kawu said.

Enkshi walked over to a nearby table, poured himself a goblet of wine, and took a deep swig. "Well, all the grotesqueness of this aside, the way I see it we at least know what to do now: we get that creature out of Master Oonai's brain as fast as we can. Once that's done, we can think about tracking down whoever is responsible." He looked at Kawu. "How can we kill it?"

Kawu tugged at the collar of his tunic. "I'm afraid it's complicated."

"A lot of things are complicated; that doesn't mean they can't be done. Now, answer the question, how do we kill it? Just tell us what you need, and we'll provide it, even if it's the godsdamned scepter of Tyr."

Kawu sighed. "I said it's complicated because you have to get the dream-eater out of the host's brain first before killing it, else it releases a toxin that severely damages all the tissue around it."

"A self-defense mechanism," Lysia said. "Then we need to remove it first?"

Shaking his head, Kawu said, "If you try to remove it forcefully, it releases the toxin as well. To my knowledge, the only way to neutralize a dream-eater is through the imprinted. He or she needs to command it to leave the host's brain."

"How… how certain are you of all this?" Ma'saa Oonai said.

Kawu gave a weary shrug. "It's what my mother told me. I might remember incorrectly, of course, or there might be another method that my mother wasn't aware of, but that's what the writings say. You need the imprinted."

Lysia rubbed her chin. "In other words, the one who is trying to kill Oonai is the only one who can save him."

"So it seems."

"That's… unfortunate."

Ma'saa Oonai let go of her husband's hand. "Well," she said, "as Enkshi said, at least we know what to do now—that's more than we had yesterday. Now all that remains to be done is to find the assassin as fast as we can and force him or her to end it."

What sounded straightforward enough turned into a dead end when they realized that all they had were guesses. The most obvious theory, that the culprit was to be found within the ranks of

the Scythe or its support network, quickly became problematic under scrutiny. First, how would the Scythe had gotten their hands on a dream-eater? Acquiring a creature that was supposed to be extinct and presumably only existed in the darkest depths of the black market would require a wealthy and influential patron—that the Scythe had such a patron was certainly a possibility, but unlikely considering that the Twins tried to abolish the concept of wealth all together. Second, if the Scythe had ever been close enough to infect Oonai with the dream-eater, a bug that after hatching was about the size of a fingernail, wouldn't they have just killed him instead? Except for its symbolic value, there was nothing to gain from Oonai's prolonged suffering. And, finally, would the Scythe have known that the coalition had been leaderless for months now, then why hadn't they made their move already?

Of course, all of those questions could have an answer—but they made the theory a lot less likely.

"The way I see it," Lysia said, leaning forward with her elbows resting on her knees, "the best way to narrow it down is to look for people who meet three criteria: One, they have the means. Two, they had to have been in his immediate vicinity about three or four moons ago when the infection must have started. And, three, they want to see Oonai suffer, or, at least"—she flicked Ma'saa Oonai a contrite look—"don't care if Oonai dies slowly."

Kawu said, "How about one of the servants? They might not have the means themselves, but they could have acted under someone else's orders and definitely were in Oonai's vicinity."

Enkshi shook his head. "Unlikely. The Blue Guard scrutinizes every cook, guard, and even cleaner thoroughly before Agaam even considers them for employment in the ziggurat. One sign of disloyalty toward the coalition or Oonai in the past, and they're disqualified… not to mention that we only ever employ people with strong family bonds."

"Who have a lot to lose," Lysia said.

"*Yuz.* Though, of course, there are people who'd be willing to send their children to the grave if it serves their deluded ideals, so you're right, we can't dismiss the possibility. Sergeant Mâadira did some questioning already a couple of weeks ago, but kept it vague, so I suppose we could try again." He turned to Agaam, who, as always, stood silently in the back of the room. "Can you arrange for everyone to be questioned?"

Agaam gave a nod in reply. "I'm also willing to answer any questions you might have, *ma'sao*."

"If there's one thing in the world that I'm certain of, Agaam, it's your loyalty—and I believe I speak for both the *ma'saa* and myself."

Ma'saa Oonai indicated assent.

"Thank you," the old servant said.

Lysia rubbed her eyes. "Okay, but this isn't enough. First of all, the questioning will take forever without a solid lead to go on. The least we need is a proper suspect, and, frankly, I think if anyone can give us a hint, it's the two of you. I mean, can't you think of anyone who would have both the motive and the means to do this? One of the other magnates, maybe, or a political enemy?"

Enkshi gave Lysia a sour smile, his teeth a perfect white against his sable skin. "Oh, *yuz,* I can think of a couple." He paused. "Dozens, to be precise. Hundreds."

"Now you're exaggerating," Ma'saa Oonai said.

"I wish I was, Nayima." He downed the rest of his wine. "You know, Jaaros always tried to shield you from all this, but trust me when I say that there are as many people who despise him as there are people who revere him. If I gave ten people this cursed bug and presented Jaaros tied

to a chair, five of them would infect him without batting an eyelash. Given recent developments, probably six or seven."

"You're exaggerating," Ma'saa Oonai repeated.

"As I said, I wish I was." Enkshi put the goblet down and walked back to the window. "The truth is, greatness always comes with friends and foes in equal parts. If you run a race, there can only be one winner, and, of course, some of the runners who don't make it get bitter… that's just in our nature." Glancing at Kawu, Jespar, and Lysia, Enkshi hesitated. Then, he frowned. "If Jaaros made a mistake, then it was to think that gold makes good armor… It doesn't. Sure, it glitters and shines and looks imposing, but while it might scare off some people, you're still as vulnerable and frail underneath as the coinless beggar from the Stone District. Jaaros was just… too confident, too careless, as if his power and wealth made him invincible. I always told him that, but he never listened. Now look where it got him."

Ma'saa Oonai studied Enkshi throughout the entire monologue. Then, she almost imperceptibly shook her head and turned her eyes back to her husband.

Lysia cleared her throat. "Fair enough. So, in a nutshell, what you're saying is that there are so many suspects that we might as well have none?"

"*Yuz*," Enkshi said. "Not to mention that if we just start merrily interrogating coalition members, we might as well tell them the whole story. The moment we approach *anyone* whose word carries even a modicum of weight, we'd better be dead certain of that person's guilt… which, again, we can't be before we have a lead to begin with."

Jespar had spent most of the conversation listening in silence—not for lack of interest but because he still felt dead tired and dizzy from the hypnosis and the drug. The light headache just

above the bridge of his nose didn't make it any better. And yet, when Enkshi finished talking, something clicked—and the memory returned.

A house on a mountain, the sky purple and orange.

Jespar said, "Maybe we do have a lead."

All eyes turned on him.

Ma'saa Oonai said, "I beg your pardon?"

Jespar sorted his thoughts. "Remember when I told you that, inside the dream, I tried to kill the parasite? Well, I just remembered that I saw something before I passed out."

Lysia wrinkled her forehead. "You saw something?"

"Yeah, like… images, memories. Some of them were my own, others weren't."

"Others weren't?" Enkshi asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well," Jespar said, "I know how it sounds, but for that one moment when that dream-eater thing touched me, I felt like I was him. Like I was Jaaros Oonai."

There was a short silence.

"Kawu?" Lysia said.

Kawu narrowed his eyes. "It's… possible. The contact might have established a temporary link between Dal'Varek's and the dream-eater's brain."

Jespar.

Ma'saa Oonai looked at Jespar, some of the exhaustion in her eyes now replaced by a cautious hope. "What exactly did you see?"

"A… house, I think. Some of kind of manor on a mountain."

"Kâara Manor," Ma'saa Oonai said.

"Cara what?" Lysia asked.

"I… it's one of our properties, north of Uunil. What else, Ma'sao Dal'Varek?"

"Well," Jespar said, "there was a woman. Your husband was talking to a woman, and they were walking through some kind of… hedge maze? I'm not sure."

Ma'saa Oonai's hand clutched the blanket. "What else?"

Jespar paused, trying to recreate the memory. Finally, he exhaled. "I don't know… it's all blurry. What I remember more than the actual images and the sounds are emotions. I felt angry, incredibly angry, and… ashamed."

"That makes sense," Kawu said. "The dream-eater feeds on the host's suffering, so the images it showed must have been ones that Oonai's mind connected to powerful negative feelings."

Jespar's throat went dry when some of the other memories he'd seen came back to him—not Oonai's, but his own. *It knows you,* he thought.

It knows you.

"You… mentioned a woman?" Ma'saa Oonai asked.

Jespar nodded.

"Who was she? Did you see her face?"

"Not really. As I said, the actual images are all very obsc—" His headache swelled. He gasped and dropped back into his chair, hands pressed against his temples.

"Jespar?"

Slowly, the pain abated, and his vision refocused. Everyone was looking at him.

"Jespar?" Lysia repeated. "Are you all right?"

Good question.

Are you?

"…Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I think so. Sorry, it's still that droga." He drank from his tea; the headache let off further, leaving him with a cloud of dizziness. From the corner of his eye, he noticed that Kawu was looking at him, eyes narrowed and slightly frowning.

"Anyway," Jespar said, "concerning that woman, I'm afraid there's not much more I can tell you. I just saw her silhouette."

Ma'saa Oonai turned to Enkshi. "I don't understand—that house must have been Kaâra Manor, that much is clear, but who was that woman? One of the servants?"

A mistress, Jespar thought. Judging by the frown on Lysia's face, she'd come to the same conclusion, but both kept quiet.

There was the briefest of hesitations before Enkshi replied, "I don't know. Possibly some merchant he did business with? There are plenty of women in the coalition. But provided—"

Ma'saa Oonai held up a hand. "Hold on, I still don't understand. If Jaaros went up there to do business with someone, why didn't he tell me?"

Enkshi exhaled. "As I told you, I don't know. Maybe there was a good reason he didn't tell us, maybe he simply had secrets, even before us. As much as I hate to say it, Nayima, now is not the time to ponder that. What matters is that, if what the dreamwalker says is true and these were Jaaros's actual memories, they might be connected to the incident—in which case, Dal'Varek is right and we do have a lead." He turned to Agaam and said, "Talk to Sergeant Mâadira and have her send a unit of guards to Kâara Manor. I want them to search it for clues as to that woman's identity and question every single one of the serv—"

"No guards," Ma'saa Oonai said. "Varroy and Dal'Varek will go, and Agaam will take them."

Enkshi gave her a look that managed to be both patient and condescending. “Look, Nayima, I respect your… wishes as to Ma’sao Dal’Varek, but it’s past time we hand this over to someone who knows his craft.”

Ma’saa Oonai’s face hardened. “Maybe I didn’t make it clear enough. This is an order.”

“You’re being unreasonable. This—”

“Morala has sent this man to help us,” Ma’saa Oonai replied, her voice raised slightly. “And this woman has not given us a single reason to distrust her. They will go, and if you do as much as think about crossing my orders, you can go back to your Starling workshops and build prostheses.”

Only him being sent by Morala, and Lysia’s trustworthiness, probably weren’t the only reasons, Jespar realized. *Or where they?*

No.

What Ma’saa Oonai feared at least as much as Morala’s judgment was that the guards *would* find something in that manor, *would* find that her husband had had secrets, and couldn’t keep their mouths shut about it. Unreasonable? Perhaps.

But human.

Enkshi held her gaze for a moment longer then dropped his eyes. “Of course, *Ma’saa*, as you wish. Agaam, you heard it—you’ll take Varroy and Dal’Varek to the manor tomorrow. I’ll prepare the necessary paperwork so that the servants know you’re on official business.”

“Of course,” Agaam said.

With a joyless smile, Enkshi clasped his hands and turned to Jespar and Lysia. “Well, that’s settled. You’ll search Kaâra Manor for clues as to what Master Oonai had been doing there and to the identity of that woman. Morala willing, that will give us enough information to track down

the assassin and force him to release the parasite. As for you, Ma'sao Nākhani, I suggest you stay here until the matter is settled. We might need your services again."

Hesitating, Kawu said, "I'd like to go with them."

Ma'saa Oonai raised her eyebrows. "Why? You're safer here."

"I… I just think I should. Please, trust me."

After a moment's consideration, Ma'saa Oonai nodded. "As you wish. I will pray for you." Looking to Jespar and Lysia, she added, "For all of you."

***

It must have been around midnight when Agaam guided them to their sleeping quarters. It was a wind-still night, the moon shining a pale light through the windows that mingled with the flickering shadows coming through the struts of Agaam's lantern.

Their rooms were located in a secluded part of the ziggurat on one of the lower floors, and, as they walked past countless rooms, an odd realization crossed Jespar's mind. For most of the year, all those rooms in the ziggurat stood empty.

Two hundred rooms, he thought. *One king and a queen.*

"Here we are," Agaam said, stopping in front a row of lavishly ornamented but nondescript doors. "Each of you may choose a room. Would you like some dinner?"

Lysia and Jespar agreed, Kawu declined.

"Very well, I'll send a maid to bring it up. Now, unless there's anything else, I advise you go get some rest now. We have a long ride ahead of us tomorrow."

He bowed and left. Before the old servant disappeared around the corner, Kawu wished them a good night and disappeared into one of the rooms. The key turned in the lock.

Lysia blew air through her lips. “Always so sociable, the boy. Crazy, isn’t it? A few hours ago, we were inside another person’s dream. Now we’re here, as though nothing happened.”

Except for that godsdamned headache, Jespar thought.

“Yeah.”

“Hey,” Lysia said, “you want to share a room? I could use some company.”

Jespar did too. And, still, when he was about to speak, the weight on his neck he’d first felt on the boat was back and all he longed for was the quiet of his chamber.

“I’d love to, but I’m still a bit woozy. Next time?”

“…Sure. Sure, no problem.”

Lysia squeezed his hand. Smiled.

Then, she went into her room, leaving him alone with the silence of the empty corridor.

Jespar expected luxury when he entered his quarters, and they didn’t disappoint. Polished mahogany paneling ran along the base of the white walls, embroidered carpets covered the stone-tiled floor. A bed large enough to accommodate three people stood at the left side of the room, windows opened into the tropical panorama that extended all around the ziggurat.

Jespar kicked off his boots and sat down on the bed. The weight on his neck was still there, and so was the headache—it felt odd, *cold* somehow. Ignoring the warning voice at the back of his head, he stuffed himself a pipe of nightflower, lit it, and took a deep drag.

The pressure on his neck eased off a little, but the headache remained.

A bit later, the servant girl knocked on his door and brought dinner. She must have been in her early twenties and was pretty, prompting Jespar’s droga-clouded mind to make some stupid

comment about how her brown eyes reminded him of autumn in Enderal. It earned him a dutiful smile. Jespar shut up, avoiding eye contact while she served the food, then left. Though it looked delicious—a steaming rice dish, yellow soup, figs, and a sugary confection—Jespar only ate a spoonful of each and returned the tray with an apologetic look when the servant girl returned.

"Anything else, *Ma'sao*?" she said.

He thought, *Company.*

Why hadn't he taken Lysia up on her offer?

You're an idiot.

He said, "Would it be possible to run me a bath?"

The servant said it was and excused herself to prepare it. Half an hour later, Jespar lay in the bathroom's ridiculously large marble basin, the hot water filling the air with steam and the smell of roses.

The headache stayed. *Maybe,* Jespar thought, t*he nightflower pipe hadn't been such a good idea after all.*

"Ma'sao Dal'Varek, your cunning is unrivaled." His voice reverberated from the high walls. All he needed was some shut-eye. He'd certainly earned it, hadn't he? After all, he'd spent hours in some messed-up nightmare spawned by a brain parasite, fled a room full of toddler-filled pig corpses, and killed a medicus in the process of disemboweling his employer.

"Just a normal weekday," he said. A grin tugged at his lips, but it felt fake. With a deep breath, he closed his eyes and slid under water, letting the warmth enfold him.

He thought of Lysia and her lopsided smile.

Kawu and how warm his palm had felt on his forehead.

The burning manor and flayed corpses.

Jespar jerked upright.

The Corpse sat on the edge of the basin.

"*Fuck!*"

Jespar started, smashing his elbow into the wall behind him. Pain exploded, shot up his arm, his shoulder, into his skull. His sight blackened.

This isn't happening.

This isn't happening.

His arm burning and his head spinning, Jespar opened his eyes.

The Corpse was still there. His yellow, dirty nails curled around a glass of wine. With a smile on his face, he raised it and toasted in Jespar's direction. Then, he gulped it down in one long, continuous draw, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down his rotten neck, the dark crimson liquid running down the corners of his mouth, his lips, his chin.

Little clouds of red formed in the water.

Jespar screamed.

Chapter 10

White Vein Tempest

HE AWOKE. The water in the tub was lukewarm, the scent had evaporated. The nape of Jespar's neck, resting on the stone rim of the basin, was stiff and hurt, just like his shoulder wound under Lysia's bandage. His hands were white and wrinkly.

The Corpse was gone.

A dream.

It had all been just a dream. He made a sound that was supposed to be a chuckle but came out as a moan and sent a shiver down his skin.

"Just a dream," he repeated.

Right?

His limbs prickling from the hour he must have spent in the tub, he heaved himself out of the basin, and dried himself with the cloth the servant had provided. He dressed and went to the door. His palm already on the handle, he spotted the wine pitcher that had come with the dinner. The servant had left it when she'd cleared the table after Jespar slid into the bath. After a moment's hesitation, he went over to it and took a deep swig. Then he went to Lysia's room, his hair still wet and the marble tiles cold under his bare feet.

He knocked five times before there was a reaction.

"…What?" a drowsy voice came from behind the door. "Who is that?"

"It's me," Jespar said. "Can I… can I come in?"

"It's late."

"Please?"

After a pause, sheets rustled, and feet shuffled. The key turned in the lock and the door opened.

"I thought you didn't want—"

Before Lysia could finish, Jespar slid past her into the room, pressed the door shut, and turned the key. He went to a wingback chair in front of the window and slumped into it with a long sigh.

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry, I just… I needed to. Did I wake you?"

"At the risk of bedazzling you, yes, you did."

"Sorry," he repeated. His eyes drifted off toward the chamber's bathroom. The door was open, allowing a glimpse inside; it had the same design. "Sorry."

Slowly, his unease alleviated a bit.

Lysia gave him a look normally reserved for escaped circus animals. "Stars burn me, Jespar… are you okay?"

"No," Jespar said. "I mean, yeah, I am, but, no, I'm not."

Lysia crossed her arms over her white nightgown, whose golden embroidery suggested it was from the ziggurat's wardrobe. "You smoked." She sounded concerned rather than accusatory. "And drank."

"A bit, yeah, but that's not it."

Conflicting emotions crossed her face. Then she pulled up a chair, back facing Jespar, and sat on it with her arms resting on the top rail.

"All right. Tell me what happened."

He did.

He told her about the headache and that lingering unease he'd been feeling ever since they'd returned from Oonai's tuewa, told her about the dream in the bathtub, told her, as the first person since he'd left Enderal, about his recurring nightmare and about the "tragic accident" in his teenage years. He left out *her* or that evening he'd found her in their room, both wrists cut open.

When he was done, Lysia regarded him silently. Outside, some bird hooted. The air smelled sweet from the two bowls of lemongrass-scented water that sat on the windowsill to keep the mosquitoes out.

"Hold still for a moment, will you?" Lysia said. She reached out, placing her hand on his forehead. "Huh. Thought so."

"What is it?"

"You're running a fever. Not much, maybe two sparks above average, but that explains the headache."

"Really?"

"Feel for yourself," she said, guiding his palm next to hers. Her fingers were warm and dry. Comforting.

She was right, his forehead was hot. Strangely enough, it felt the exact opposite, which was why he hadn't noticed it himself.

"Must be that dream droga."

"Probably." She got up and walked to her knapsack, which leaned against the side of her bed, rummaged through it, and returned with a vial filled with green pellets. She took one and gave it to Jespar. "Here. If you're not feeling any better by the morning, I'll give you another one."

"Thanks," Jespar said. He poured Lysia and himself two goblets of water from a pitcher on a nearby bureau, took the pill, and washed it down. It left a bitter, earthy aftertaste.

"All right," Lysia said, sitting back down and resting her arms on the top rail of the chair. "Now, concerning the rest of what you told me. First, what you saw in the bathroom wasn't real. You know that, right? You were asleep and dreamed the corpse was there, but it wasn't really."

"Yeah. I know."

"Good. Second, I know you've probably heard it a thousand times, but I'm genuinely sorry about what happened to your family. It's… tragic. No idea how else to say it."

And could have been avoided if someone hadn't put his holy "ideals" before the life of his own fucking family.

A glassy expression in his eyes, Jespar waved his goblet dismissively. "We all have our burdens."

"Maybe," Lysia said, "but, still… And finally, as for that recurring dream… do you mind if I tell you a story? Be warned, I'm the protagonist."

"Go ahead."

"Okay." She paused as if to sort her thoughts first. Pointing at her scar, she said, "Did you ever wonder how I got this?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. I just wasn't sure if it's a touchy subject, so I didn't ask."

Lysia smirked. "A true gentleman. Well, brace yourself… I got hit by lightning."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. Back when I was twelve."

"How… how did that happen?"

"While I was out gathering herbs with a Sister, the only other novice my age. You have to know that the monastery of the White Leaf is on the eastern coast of Melây, the 'warmest part,' which in Melâyan terms just means it's tundra—wide open space with shrubs as far as the eye

can see." She traced her index finger along the edge of her goblet. "Anyway, while we were on our way back—it must have been early afternoon—a storm came up, and the monastery was still a good hour's walk away. Melâyans have a word for those sudden storms, you know? 'White Vein Tempest.' The name comes from how the sky looks like a web of illuminated, white-blue veins when the lightning bolts come crashing down one after another. It's… haunting." Lysia shivered. "Could you…?" she said, indicating at the shutters. Jespar stood, closed them, then sat back down.

"Thanks," Lysia said. Something about her voice was different, gone was the huskiness, gone was the energy. She sounded flat and quiet. "Where was I? Right, the storm. We looked for cover, a wind bed or something, when the clouds drew together, but there was none, just plains and shrubs as far as the eye could see. Before we knew it, it was pouring buckets and the thunder was rolling… my Sister told me to get down on my haunches and put my head between my knees to make myself as small as possible, and I did, but then everything went black."

"The lightning hit you."

Lysia nodded. A faraway look came to her face. "Yeah. I was in a coma for three weeks, my brain practically dead. And when I finally woke up again, it didn't happen bit by bit as it usually does, but all at once. There I was, back in the world of the living… and not only was I still alive, I was completely unscathed except for—" she flourished her hand down the scar— "this lovely piece of art imprinted into my skin. It's where the electricity traveled down my body." She looked up, but when her gaze locked with Jespar's, she immediately averted her eyes.

Ashamed, Jespar realized. *She's ashamed.*

"Actually, it looks pretty good," he said.

"Sure."

"No, I mean it. It has that… roguish adventurer look. Goes along well with the temper."

A faint smile tugged at the corners of Lysia's mouth. "Uh-huh. Well, I'll take your word for it. Anyway—according to the sisters, the fact that I survived White Vein lightning was nothing next to a miracle, and they told me so over and over while they ran all manner of tests on me, almost as if they were hoping to find some kind of newly-awakened magical talent or something." Lysia shrugged. "Turned out there was nothing, and, three weeks later, I was back to tending the gardens and cleaning scalpels again. Life just went on as it had before."

"But…?"

Lysia hesitated. "Remember when I told you why I left the monastery?"

"Because you believe one has to see the world to heal it, and because you want to 'live like a god, love like an eagle, and dream like a madman.' Or something like that."

This time she gave her husky laugh, making Jespar grin. The memory of the Corpse in the bathroom was still there but it had faded, at least a little.

"Something like that. Thing is, that wasn't all. Another reason was a nightmare I kept on having after the incident."

"A nightmare," Jespar said.

"Yes. It wasn't about the strike itself," she said, "but about that night three weeks after I woke up from my coma. Even now, I still remember it as though it were yesterday. It was early evening but already dark, and the Sister overseeing the infirmary had gone to do her rounds. I woke up on a stone slab, like the ones they put you on for dissection. As you can imagine, I was scared out of my bones… I got up from the slab, barefoot, freezing, and still woozy, and wandered through the monastery crying for help. In reality, it must have been just a couple of minutes before one of the Sisters found me, comforted me, and wrapped me in a blanket with a

cup of hot chocolate before she woke up the other Sisters to tell everyone that a miracle had happened."

"But that's not what happens in the dream," Jespar said.

"Exactly. You see, the White Leaf has a tradition. When a Sister dies, the order doesn't bury her body but keeps it in the monastery to dissect and study it. It makes sense, of course—they dedicate their lives to advance medicine, so why shouldn't they also dedicate their dead bodies to it? However, it also means that the monastery's morgue is always packed with the cadavers of patients and Sisters, all embalmed and cut open in various ways. Some have no skin, some lack a limb, and so on, and so forth."

Jespar scratched his neck. "Spooky."

"Mh-hm. Either way, in that nightmare, Little Lysia wakes up on the stone slab, is scared out of her bones, and wanders alone through the hallway. But, somehow, here she ends up at the stairs leading down into the morgue." She brought her goblet to her lips as if to drink, hesitated, then put it back down. "Stars burn me," she said, "it's been ages since I've talked to someone about this."

"I can relate."

They shared a smile. It felt good, connected.

"Anyway, suddenly, these white, dead faces appear in the darkness at the bottom of the staircase. The dead Sisters, their heads shaved and embalming fluid running over their lips and out of their orifices. They stare at her but there's no malice in their eyes—on the contrary, their faces look almost… benevolent, I guess. Friendly. And then they speak."

"What… what do they say?"

"Just two words: 'Welcome home.'" Lysia paused. "Little Lysia tries to run, but she can't move her legs, as though there's ice running through her veins instead of blood. She tries to scream, but her throat is frozen, and she notices how *cold* she feels, and that there's a foul, rotten stench coming from her own skin. The cadavers slowly walk up the stairs, and they smile, and Little Lysia don't know why, but something about the way they smile makes her think of mothers reuniting with their lost daughters. Then, one of the Sisters, who has no skin on her face, takes Little Lysia by her hand and Little Lysia goes with her. She doesn't want to, of course—she's so terrified she feels like she's about to choke, but her feet just move on their own."

Lysia let out a breath and put her goblet back on the table. Though her face was strangely blank, the fingers of her right hand clawed into her left arm and she kept on bouncing one of her legs up and down.

"So, they lead her down into the morgue and there are those sarcophagi in rows that the Sisters always keep cold with magic to store the bodies in, and there's that bitter, clean, pungent smell everywhere. Then they put Little Lysia into one of them and close the lid."

"…Shit."

"Yeah. But do you want to know the scariest part?"

"What?"

"Little Lysia doesn't mind. Of course, she's horrified, of course she hammers her fists against the lid, but then, gradually, she starts to feel comfortable… at peace, you could say. Because she finally realizes that this is where she belongs."

Jespar didn't reply.

"In a coffin," Lysia said. "She should be in a coffin because that bloody lightning should have killed her just as the Sisters kept on telling her."

After a brief silence, Jespar said, “But you survived. You know that, right? You survived.”

Lysia gave him a joyless smile. “Of course I know. I’m not superstitious, and I’m not mad. But, still, to this day, there’s a tiny part in the depths of my brain that seems convinced that I’m not, and that all this—” she made an all-encompassing gesture— “is just a great charade. Some trick my mind plays on me to fool me into believing I survived.”

Her features relaxed, and the glassy look disappeared from her eyes. She took a hair tie from a pocket in her nightgown and put her hair in a ponytail.

“Wow,” she said, “that got heavy. As I said, I know I’m alive as can be, and I’m not mad, but to get to the point I’m trying to make, to this day, I believe I *might* have ended up a lunatic if I had ignored what the dream was trying to tell me, irrational as it may have been.”

Jespar licked his lips. “Which was…?”

“That had I stayed in the monastery, I could never beat that irrational, subconscious fear that the dream was right after all. I just…” She let out a long breath. “I needed to leave… I needed to live.”

“You needed to prove to yourself you weren’t dead.”

Lysia smiled, but her eyes didn’t follow her lips. “Gods, now you’re making it sound a touch theatrical. But, yeah, at one point, my adolescent, dramatically inclined mind might have had that thought. Which leads me to the moral of the story. I’m not an expert on matters of the mind, and I’m not a ‘dreamwalker,’ but, maybe, just maybe, that dream is trying to tell you something too. And, maybe, once you find out what that is and act upon it, it will stop coming—just as mine eventually stopped.”

A thousand thoughts shot through Jespar’s head, but, somehow, he couldn’t articulate any of them—or didn’t want to.

"I'll think on it," he said instead. "Thank you. For sharing this, I mean."

"You're welcome."

A long silence ensued. They both studied the contents of their goblets.

Jespar cleared his throat. "Do you… do you mind if I belatedly take you up on your offer? And stay?"

For some reason, the question seemed to catch Lysia off guard. She opened her mouth as if to reply then closed it again.

"Okay," she said after a while. "You can stay."

"Thank—"

"Under one condition."

Jespar scrunched up an eyebrow. "Okay?"

"The boy. I hate to bring this up, but… what do you feel for him?"

"Kawu?"

Lysia nodded.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Pretty sure you do," Lysia said. "I saw the way you were looking at him. And vice versa, I might add."

Following an awkward silence, Lysia gave a long exhale. "Okay, Jespar, let me be frank: I like you. More than I expected."

"Oh."

"Is that a problem?"

"No, it's just… what happened to 'just fun' and 'no strings attached'?"

Lysia shrugged. “I guess my feelings changed. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t lying back then… I did want fun, nothing more, nothing less. And, even now, I’m not entirely sure how I feel for you. Stars burn me, we’ve known each other for how long, four days?”

“Three.”

“There you have it—hardly qualifies as an affair. But, still, for some reason, I feel… drawn to you, cheesy as it may sound, and there are aspects about your behavior that confuse me. Now, please, don’t give me that look. You know what I mean. Ever since we’ve returned from Yuva, you’ve become… distant. Erratic.”

“I’m a complex man.” It was supposed to lighten the mood, but sounded awkward when he said it, almost sulking.

“No argument there,” Lysia said. “Look, I’m aware we barely even know each other and, as we don’t have any kind of commitment to each other, you can obviously do as you please. All I’m saying is that, considering this unexpected shift in my feelings, I’m not sure if I want to be a part of that. Which is why I suggest this: We can continue this mission as professionals, as friends, or as whatever else you want to call that other thing between us. The latter, however, only under the condition that we’re making this exclusive. Not because I’m possessive, not because I want to put a sword to your chest, but simply because this mission is crazy enough as it is, and I don’t have the nerve and energy to compete for your affection in some love triangle with a brooding psychic. So…” She opened her palms. “Do you want to pursue this or not? I’m not saying this to force you into something you don’t want, Jespar, and I’m not going to be angry if you’d rather keep things friendly. All I’m asking for is honesty.”

For a couple of breaths, Jespar said nothing, expecting that invisible weight in his neck to return. To his surprise, it didn't. Instead, the warmth he'd felt that first night on the ship was back, like a campfire after a long march through mud and rain.

Of course, that wasn't all.

The second reason he didn't want to leave, why he wanted to be close to her, was that the idea of returning to his chambers and crawling under his bedsheets alone, constantly glimpsing at the bathroom door where only an hour ago a visitor from another plane of reality had sat, turned his stomach.

A dream, Jespar thought. *It was just a dream.*

He said, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah. You're right, I guess I have been acting erratically, and I'm sorry for not being upfront with you. And, it's true, there is something about Kawu that I feel drawn to, but I'm not going to pursue it."

"Look, I don't want to force—"

He placed his hand on hers. "Lysia, I want this. Okay? I…" He exhaled. "It was more than just sex to me that night, too, and I want this thing between us to continue… whatever it is, could be, or will be."

After the briefest of hesitations, Lysia smiled. "Good—thanks for being upfront." She chuckled, shook her head. "My, that was probably the most civilized discussion about a love affair I've ever had

"Now that you say it, I kind of missed the shouting and the vase-hurling, to be honest."

Lysia grinned. “Maybe next time. Well, now that that’s out of the way, how about we make sure we catch whatever sleep the night has left?”

They didn’t get much.

Sex was the last thing Jespar had expected or even wanted when he’d knocked at her door an hour ago, but when they slipped under the blankets and Lysia cuddled up next to him, it wasn’t long before the comfortable warmth in his belly traveled downward. He gently pulled her closer and began stroking her hair. They kissed.

One thing led to another.

Later, they lay next to each other, sweat beading on her skin, their breath fast and shallow. Lysia heaved a pleased sigh and rolled over to kiss him again, her lips warm, soft, and salty, the strands of her loose brown hair brushing over his skin. Jespar kissed down the length of her neck, her chest, her nipples. She ran her fingers through his hair and muttered something.

Jespar glanced up. “Did you say something?”

Lysia lay back down, resting her head on his chest. “Just that I’m glad.” She traced her finger over his navel, drawing lazy circles. “That you’re staying.”

Smiling, Jespar closed his eyes. “The feeling’s mutual.”

Chapter 11

The Big Dream

LYSIA, JESPAR, AND KAWU BROKE FAST in a lavish dining room near their sleeping quarters. Feeble predawn light filtered through the windows, mingling with the glow of the candles. While neither Lysia nor Jespar were talkative, Kawu barely spoke and didn't lift his eyes from the plate while he ate. The moment he scooped up the last of his meal—he never left as much as a single grain of rice, kernel of corn, or fruit seed—he excused himself and left.

Lysia let out a breath when the door fell shut behind him. "You really aren't feeling it, are you? That… aura?"

Jespar shook his head.

The sun was a faint red sliver along the horizon when they met Agaam outside. He led them to the stables, where a servant boy finished saddling the last of four horses—black Skarragian cliffroamers, probably worth a fortune each. Morning birds chirped in the trees, flies and mosquitoes harried the group to scavenge some last drops of blood before daylight.

Agaam gave the boy a coin then dismissed him. When they were about to mount their horses, Enkshi came hurrying up to them. He wore a plain blue robe and no jewelry. Shadows hung under his eyes, salt and pepper stubble showed on his cheeks and head.

Panting, he came to a halt. "Wait."

Agaam dropped the reins and bowed. "Ma'sao Enkshi."

Enkshi acknowledged him with a nod. He seemed about to speak then sighed and massaged his eyes with the heels of his hands. “There’s something we should talk about before you leave. Follow me.”

He led them into a room on the twenty-first floor, two levels below the top where Jaaros and Nayima Oonai resided. The big room was walled by ceiling-high bookshelves, each filled to the brim. Enkshi sat behind a massive black desk packed with scrolls and papers, but tidy. He didn’t offer them a chair.

“There are two things you should know before you set out. The first concerns Ma’sao Oonai: He wasn’t faithful to his wife.”

Shock of shocks, Jespar thought. “So he had a mistress.”

“No,” Enkshi said, “not a mistress in the classic sense of the word. He had… diversions. Several, in fact.” Seeing the expression on Lysia’s, face Enkshi frowned. “Look, I know how it sounds, but there’s no need to get all indignant. Jaaros, Master Oonai, he loves his wife, that’s as certain as the next sunset. Those women he takes up to Kaâra Manor with him are just… dalliances. A respite from the travails of daily life here in the city.”

Lysia said, “Respites that Ma’saa Nayima knows nothing about, I assume.”

Enkshi shook his head, looking annoyed, even sulky, as if there was something inherently unjust about him needing to have this conversation in the first place.

Kawu spoke up. “Could the woman from Dal’Varek’s vision be one of these ‘dalliances’?”

“It’s possible, that’s why I’m telling you this. But, before you ask, no, I don’t know who he was with the last time he went up, because he kept that part of his life private… even from me. Still, we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Even if one of Jaaros’s women is involved in this matter, she wouldn’t have had the means to buy the parasite. Also, if what you said about the period

from infestation to coma being several weeks to a couple of months is true, it can't have happened up in the manor. As I said, the last time he was there was at the beginning of Drought, around six moons ago."

"In other words," Jespar said, "if one of his affairs is behind this, she must have had support."

"Correct."

After an interval of silence, Enkshi nodded. "Well, there's that. The second matter doesn't really change anything about our plan of action, but I believe you should know either way: Last night, when you were already asleep, we received a report from General Duul. Not only has the Scythe doubled in numbers, they are actively spreading the rumor in the city that Master Oonai is dead."

"You think they know?" Lysia said.

"Either that or they are gauging our reaction. If we go after the gossipers too harshly, that's also an answer, isn't it? No, Oonai needs to make a public appearance, and he needs to do so soon, otherwise the have-nots will believe the rumor and flock to the Scythe's recruiters like bees to their queens. Not to mention that the coalition is also starting to get nervous—Third Magnate Vel'Nyx has even sailed to Qyra under the pretense of some business matter, and the second magnate has requested an audience with Ma'sao Oonai as soon as possible."

"The magnates must know something is amiss by now, don't they?" asked Jespar. "I mean, how long has it been since Oonai was last seen in public? Moons?"

"Oh, they've known that something is 'amiss' for a while now, of course. Just not what, exactly. Either way, there's no point in continuing this conversation—what it comes down to is that we need answers, and we need them fast."

They left the ziggurat, taking a path along the eastern cliff of Mount Uunil, the city a kaleidoscope of structures, colors, and bustling crowds passing by beneath them. By sunrise, they had descended into the jungle that made up the eastern side of the island, following a barely-paved path instead of the main road to avoid unnecessary attention. Scattered rays of sunlight broke through the scintillating canopy over their heads, and the air was heavy with the smells of heat and growth and rot. Following Lysia's advice, Jespar took two more of Lysia's herbal pellets at their first break. A precaution, she said. Despite the sweltering heat, his fever was next to gone.

Three hours later, they reached the eastern coast, an oddly-shaped stretch of brown rocks and scattered green, perforated by the occasional lagoon. Narrow strips of land ran between the rocks and the lagoons. "The Mandibles," Agaam explained. "One of the two land bridges connecting the southern part of Uunil to the north."

Having crossed it, Jespar was surprised to realize just how much northern Uunil differed from the south. The southern half of the island was a carpet of trees, with only an occasional clearing for a village, town, or plantation on the eastern coast, and the white metropolis of Uunil-Yâr running along the entire west coast. The north, on the other hand, was a hilly, sparsely populated expanse of trees and grass mostly turned yellow by the long dry season. Only a few other travelers crossed their path on the way inland, and they passed no more than two settlements, one near a rice terrace, the other built around a colossal jade mine.

It must have been early afternoon when they stopped in a tavern at a wide crossroads. It was packed with travelers, the smells of fried plantains, rice, and spices wafting through the sticky, humid air and mingling with swirls of gray and violet smoke that rose from pipes of tobacco and nightflower. On a round stage amid the tables, a woman plucked away at a lyre, accompanied by

a man playing a reed pipe. A couple of heads turned to Jespar and the others when they entered, looking at his white-blond hair for a breath or two then quickly returning their attention to their meals, drinks, and conversations.

Agaam led them to table in the corner where they sat and signaled for the innkeeper. A skinny woman with a pointy nose and light brown hair—a rare sight among Kiléans—came and took their orders. When it was Agaam's turn, the old servant's face was frozen, his eyes seeming to stare right through the woman.

"Ma'sao?" the waitress asked.

Agaam looked up. "*Yuz*?"

"What do you want?"

Agaam made his order.

"Are you all right?" Jespar asked Agaam when the waitress scurried back to the kitchen.

A breath passed before the old servant replied, "Just tired." He smiled. "It's been a long two days."

Understatement of the century.

They ate their food, making conversation about the gods and the world, but avoiding the topic of their mission, both what had happened in Oonai's dream and what lay ahead. When he'd finished his meal, Jespar went out to relieve himself. Clouds had formed, covering the afternoon sky like a threadbare curtain. He buckled his trousers.

Pain exploded.

It filled his entire skull, tinting the world blue-white. Jespar staggered, almost fell, caught himself on a nearby palm.

As fast as it had come, the pain stopped and went down to a dull afterglow, cold smoke filling his brain. For some heartbeats, Jespar did nothing. His breath came heavy and ragged, bile tickled in his throat, blood ran down his chin from a lip he had bit open.

What the hell?

He hadn't smoked, he hadn't drunk, he hadn't consumed any obscure Makehu drogae, so what on Vyn was happening to him? A thought manifested on the bottom of Jespar's mind, but it vanished before he could—

Or wanted to?

—grasp it.

"The fever," he said. "That godsdamned fever."

Wiping blood and sweat from his chin, he went back inside.

When his hand touched the door handle, Jespar froze. Inside, over the sounds of the crowd and the music, people were shouting at each other, and judging by the tone of their voices, it was about more than just a spilled bowl of rice wine. There was a thump, and one of the voices ceased.

Jespar entered.

Three men dressed in peasant's clothes were gathered around a table at the far end of the room. Between them sat a woman and a scrawny man, whom one of the peasants, unusually tall, held by the back of his hair, the man's face pushed into a bowl of stew. For some reason, Jespar recognized the tall peasant not by his chalk white skin and hair or his pointed ears but rather by the weapon strapped onto his back: a double-bladed polearm.

The White Twins.

Twin, that was. The Aeterna's sister was nowhere to be seen.

By now, the drummer and the lyrist had stopped playing, and all eyes were on the scene unfolding before them.

The woman looked horrified, but sat still as a sculpture, her eyes bloodshot and sheening. "—doesn't anyone help us? *Saaras'Jodule,* someone."

Just like the man's, her clothes were to the peasants' garb what diamonds were to pebbles: fine leather, silk, jewelry.

Moneyed aristocracy.

"Good question," the White Brother said, letting go of the nobleman's hair. His head flopped into the bowl, tipping it over and spilling stew all over the table and his tunic. The White Brother fixed his red eyes into the crowd. "Why, indeed, don't you help them?"

There was silence.

"Why?"

Again, no answer.

Jespar flicked a glance at his group. Kawu sat still, watching with apprehension. Lysia's lips were a white line. Agaam seemed as controlled as always, though Jespar imagined a trace of grim alertness in his face.

"That's right," the White Brother said, turning back to the woman. His Inâl was perfect, without the trace of an accent. "No one's helping you because no one here gives a shit. Must feel strange, huh? To be on the receiving end of the whip for a change?"

The woman stared at him. "Please," she said. "Please don't do this. We'll give you whatever you want."

A grin split the White Brother's face. "Words… You still think they can save you. Well, I get it, it's what you're used to after all. Words are what your lies are made of, words are what you

use to control us, words are the clay you form your stories with, words are what we suck up like toddlers do the milk from their mothers' teat."

He turned his face back to the crowd. "The Big Dream," he said, voice raised. "That's their favorite story, you know? 'We're the architects of our own fortune,' 'chances, not obstacles,' and so on and so on, the fairy tale that all of us, regardless of where we come from, can one day afford our own house in the Jade District if only we work hard enough." He sighed, gaze drifting off into middle distance. "Ah, *yuz*... the Big Dream. What a nice story, isn't it? Uplifting, you might say. Empowering." His eyes snapped back. "Pity that the storytellers always forget to point out the problem."

He grabbed the woman by her topknot, yanking her face up so she was forced to look at him. She gasped, then broke into a sob.

"The dream is rotten."

A long pause.

"Imagine a baker. Like most people, he's a Big Dreamer, and he has his own bakery in the Stone District. Nothing remarkable, good, honest work. In one day, he can bake fifty loaves, enough for him to feed himself and his family and not to be what we all fear to become: coinless." He held up his index finger. "But," he continued, "the people like his loaves so much that, one day out of two, he finds himself running out of loaves by midday and customers leave disappointed. He doesn't want that, so what does he do? Right: He hires two helpers so he can produce one-hundred and fifty loaves a day.

"This works out well until, one day, the baker has a realization: Even with the helpers, selling the loaves at the price he currently does only brings him a bit more coin than it costs him to produce them. He has already raised the prices to a point where raising them any more would

scare his customers off. In other words: he is trapped." The White Brother took a step forward, palms up. "But then the scales fall from his eyes. Why doesn't he simply pay his helpers a little less? *Yuz,* they might quit, but, let's be honest, there are hundreds, thousands of hard-working Kiléans on the streets who would jump at the chance, aren't there? So, one day, he breaks the bad news, and his helpers accept it. With a regretful but triumphant smile, the baker counts his earnings three months later and finds that cutting the wages brought him enough profit to open a second bakery across town within a year, if he puts it on the side and cuts some more expenses—cheaper grain, maybe; who'll notice the difference? And why not let his new helpers work for an hour longer each day?"

Once again, the White Brother let his eyes drift across the room. This time they passed Jespar, but if the Aeterna recognized him, he didn't show it.

"Doesn't sound so bad, does it? No, of course not, because you all think that you could be the baker in that story. And, *yuz,* who knows, maybe you could, but no matter how you look at it, one truth will never change: We can't all be bakers. If we were, where would be the helpers?"

He paused, letting his words take effect.

"The dream…" he said. "is rotten. Its very nature is rooted in exploitation, greed, and inequality, and there's only room for so many Big Dreamers in each telling of the story. *We're* the helpers, *we're* the coinless *kazuums* they look down on, we're the have-nots. And trust me, my friends, they know it. There they sit in their palaces, doing nothing, while we bake their bread for them, fourteen hours a day, breaking our backs, working our hands bloody and still earning just enough to keep our children from starving! We're not people to them, we're *material,* but in their eyes, we deserve it because we're responsible for our own misery, because we just didn't dream big enough, because we're too lazy, too weak, too dumb! But are we,

really? What about the man forced to spend all the money he earns on caring for his sick mother? What about the woman who loses everything in a hurricane and is too old to start over? What about the miner who toiled for years only to lose his legs in a rockslide, what about the feebleminded, the disabled? Godsdammit, what about those who fate or chance simply didn't favor? 'Coinless,' the leeches say, 'lazy,' they say, not worthy of a life in dignity!"

The White Brother turned back to the woman, eyes seeping with hate. "Isn't that right? That's what you think when you sit in your manor that you built on our backs, drink the wine you tapped from our veins, chew the meat you ripped from our bones, eat the fat you sucked from our marrow! And then you laugh because we, the helpers, the proles, the 'have-nots' are too stupid to even realize it!"

When the woman didn't answer, he smashed his fist down on the table. "I asked you a *fucking* question!"

The woman jerked. "You… you don't even know us," she finally managed.

A mirthless smile split the White Brother's lips. "Vaalos, remind me. Who are they?"

One of the other peasants spoke up, a bearded man with pockmarked skin. "Dijaam and Katros Vel'Doran. Owners of the biggest armory in the archipelago, which supplies the Blue Guards."

"Why, would you look at that," the White Brother said, leaning in on the woman. "You really dreamed big, didn't you? How foolish of you to come here without a proper escort."

"We never did any harm, *Ma'sao*," the woman said. "Never. We never exploited anybody."

"Do you know what my sister did to the last leech she got her hands on? She cut off his eyelids so that he couldn't choose to be blind whenever he wanted to. I must admit, I like the idea. Brutal, but poetic."

The White Brother let go of her head, and the woman sunk down into her chair with a sob. She buried her face in her arms.

Do something, a voice within Jespar said.

Another one replied: *Are you crazy?*

He'd seen how the White Brother could fight. Even without his sister, there was no chance Jespar could stand his ground against him in one-on-one combat, much less against all three of them.

The first voice said, *He's going to mutilate her.*

Not your battle, the other retorted.

Not your battle.

In the end, the White Brother made the decision when he broke into a wide grin. "Well, guess what, today's your lucky day. I know that you and your husband are indeed among the better leeches out there, if such a thing even exists, so I merely want you to pass on a message." He put his hand on the noblewoman's shoulder and leaned closer, like someone consoling a friend, the tips of his long white hair brushing the top of the woman's head. "Could you kindly do that for me?"

The noblewoman muttered a reply.

"Good. I want you to go home and tell each of your slave-driving friends that the stupid have-nots have finally woken up and that they are godsdamned angry. Tell them that we're on the cusp of a new order, and that no one, not even the First Magnate and his army of blue clowns is going to stop us. Tell them to pack whatever they can and flee, because once the revolution starts, there will be no more mercy for the likes of you.

"Tell them we're going to start a fire."

He straightened his back, drew a knife, and cut the fat purse from the woman's husband's belt, then he held out his hand to her. "Please?"

Fingers trembling, the woman handed over her purse.

To the innkeeper, the White Brother said, "Their cargo and horses are yours to keep, but give them mules in exchange. They have to get to the city somehow."

"…*Yuz*. Of course, *Ma'sao*."

Smiling, the White Brother turned back to the woman. "What is it? Are you going to offer us a cup of rice wine next, or are you going to grab your leech husband and get the fuck out of here?"

Mumbling something under her breath, she heaved herself out of her chair, grabbed her husband under the armpits and dragged him out of the tavern. Minutes went by until the door finally fell shut behind them. Everyone turned to the White Brother, who had been watching the process without blinking.

He tossed the two purses to the maid with the chestnut hair, who managed to catch one of them. The other one hit the counter, sending a shower of coins clattering across the grease-stained old floorboards.

"Free meals and drinks for everyone," the White Brother said. Then, to the crowd: "I'm counting on you."

With that, the Scythes left.

The silence in the tavern stretched on a minute longer, as if the Aeterna's presence had left an echo that needed to fade first before normalcy could reinstate itself.

Then a woman cheered. Someone else joined in, and soon, half the tavern roared.

Arms crossed, Jespar looked over to his companions. Lysia watched the hubbub with a wary frown, Kawu sat hunch-backed, arms folded around his chest as if to shield himself from cold. Jespar returned to the table, where they finished their drinks, paid for their food, and left.

Chapter 12

When All This Is Over

THEY RODE THROUGH THE AFTERNOON HEAT, following a path winding along the eastern coast. To their left, the jungle extended inland in garish colors, backdropped by Mount Kâara and its waveform ridges; to their right, waves crashed against the sunbaked cliffs. Mosquitoes stirred in the heat, circling Jespar, waiting for an unwary moment.

"May I ask you something, Agaam?" Jespar asked after a period of riding in silence.

The old servant turned his head. "*Ma'sao*?"

"What are your thoughts on what that Aeterna said? You know, the leeches, the helpers, the dreamers?"

"What does it matter, *ma'sao*?"

"I'm just curious. You've served him for decades, so you must have an opinion." *Which you're most likely not going to tell me.*

To Jespar's surprise, Agaam gave him a hollow smile. "It's a story."

Lysia pulled up her horse, falling into a canter beside Jespar. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean," Agaam said, "that both the coalition and the White Twins use only parts of the truth and reassemble them into a story that serves their purpose. Every moneyed aristocrat or Coalition member knows there's injustice in the system, but they ignore it, and the Twins do the same thing. Certainly, they are correct to point out that there is limited room for 'big dreamers' in Kilé, but at the same time, they ignore that the idea of complete 'equality' as they evangelize it, has always been problematic, to say the least—ever since we civilized races came into existence, it has been in our nature to struggle and compete. Not to mention that the Light-Born would never accept a reign of the Scythe if their coup, riot, or whatever they envision to take control were to work. Of course, they tell their followers none of this because they, too, sell a story."

Jespar, who had expected a terse, noncommittal answer, found himself short of words.

"If both ideas are unjust," Lysia asked, "then what's the answer?"

After a moment's consideration Agaam replied, "I don't know, *Ma'sae.* But I believe this country has seen enough suffering and the way to make it better shouldn't be through violence, as the Scythe envisions it."

They crossed a small bridge over a river from the mountains, the dusk sun creating diamond-like reflections in the water. Jespar was ready to let the conversation rest when Kawu spoke up behind them. "Whatever that Aeterna said—he doesn't mean it."

All eyes fell on him. "How so?" Jespar asked.

Lowering his gaze, Kawu continued, "Everything about him is a lie, and most likely his twin sister is no different. He uses all the right words, but he doesn't mean them, he claims to be a savior but doesn't care about the people because his soul is ultimately empty."

"I don't follow," Lysia said.

"It's hard to explain. In Makehu, we have a word for people like him: *sawahe,* which I suppose could be translated as 'soul-dead.' About one in ten thousand children is born this way, and their minds function differently from ours—they don't feel compassion, they don't take pleasure in the things normal people do, and their *tuewas* are black voids. They crave to inflict suffering, you could say, the same way we crave food or drink."

Jespar said, "That sounds… grim. How do you know the Twins are like that?"

Shortly, Kawu seemed uncertain. A green bird with a red beak swooped past them and disappeared in the foliage. "Because my uncle was *sawahe.* And the way that Aeterna talked, acted, and that look in his eyes… it was my uncle all over again."

"So you're saying the White Twins are impostors?" Lysia asked.

"At least the man, *yuz*."

"Huh. Then why did they form the Scythe? Because they want, what, a giant bloodbath?"

Kawu considered. At last, he said, "It's possible."

***

After one more hour of leisurely canter along the coast, the path branched off left into the jungle and toward a gentle slope that marked the beginning of the long ascent to Mount Kaâra, a reclining, hump-backed giant whose highest ridges disappeared in violet clouds. As afternoon slowly turned into dusk, Jespar's fever made a brief reappearance, but it abated after Lysia gave him three more pellets. In the jungle, the path got wilder, with storm-felled trees and virulently

growing ferns with dagger-shaped leaves obstructing the path. They'd met the last traveler two hours ago, and he'd greeted him with a wary, curious tip of the hat. In the evening redness, they set up camp in a clearing near the road, the citronella infusion they had put on their skin at Agaam's behest their only protection against the ravenous mosquitoes and bloodbugs, big, bulbous insects you had to pluck off your skin once they had landed.

Near the clearing, a creek meandered through the boscage, and Lysia, Jespar, and Kawu used the last light of the day to wash the sweat and grime off, the sun an incandescent, inflamed eye between the peaks of Mount Kaâra. Freshly washed but the sweat already forming anew, they returned to camp, where a fire glowed against the blue of the night. The old servant greeted them with a smile and nodded to a pot simmering over the logs, filled with a spicy-smelling stew. Using a machete, he opened a coconut for each of them and they ate under sparse conversation.

While Agaam and Kawu excused themselves after dinner, Lysia and Jespar talked a little longer before curling up in a spot in the shade to sleep.

Or trying to.

Jespar was restless. The comfort he felt near Lysia last night wouldn't settle in, and his mind raced around the White Brother, his speech, and Oonai's fever. At one point, his thoughts drifted off to his youth, the incident, the numbness that had followed, that day he'd come into the room and seen the bloody sheets. Even stranger was that it took him the utmost effort to stop the images, and even when he opened his eyes an echo remained, almost as if it had just happened—not twelve years ago, in another life, to another person that he'd left behind upon boarding that ship.

After what must have been an hour of shifting around, he got up, stretched his legs, and drank some water. Agaam sat leaning against a tree trunk, hands folded in his lap, eyes closed, though Jespar couldn't help but feel he was awake. Jespar went through his belt pouch, found the vial with the pellets Lysia had given him, took two, and lay back down.

Sleep came at once.

Jespar had always considered his dreams to be vivid, but this night proved him wrong. When he awoke in the courtroom, he didn't just see the sunlight falling through the arched windows, he felt it singe his skin. When the Corpse passed his judgment, he didn't just see his decaying mouth, but also the sinewy strands of flesh caught in the spaces between his teeth and the red tint

of his saliva. When they flayed him, he didn't just feel the knives tearing off his skin but cutting deep into his soul.

Coward.

He awoke with a gasp.

Sweat drenched him, his breath came in fits, his heart hammered against the inside of his chest like a frenzied animal trying to break its cage.

"I'm awake," he tried to say, but before his mouth could form the words, the fever flared up, sending him back onto the grass. Lysia mumbled something in her sleep.

Lysia?

He stared at the body in his arms. Bulky. Soft. Gray robes, reeking of feces, urine, rot.

Though deep down something in him screamed, a paralyzing calm took hold of him.

No.

This didn't make any sense—the Corpse couldn't be here, wasn't here, was a phantasm, the afterthought of the nightmare. He was still dreaming, that was the only explanation. Just like he had been last night in the ziggurat.

Or was he?

"I'm awake," Jespar said. "I'm awake."

Nothing changed. The Corpse lay there, soft and foul and boneless like rotten fruit, unmoving.

Holding his breath, Jespar withdrew his arms from around the Corpse, every muscle taut, every synapse ready to fire should the creature suddenly jolt awake, turn to face him, that look of contempt and shame and disgust in his eyes that—

Focus.

Fucking focus.

Jespar slid back and back, ignoring the pain in his shoulder wound, back, moving faster the farther he got. Only when he had gotten five arm-lengths between them, he scrambled to his feet and ran.

He had almost reached the border of the forest when he stopped and looked back, for one single moment convinced he'd see Lysia lying there, the way it had been, should be—*was*, because none of this could be happening.

The Corpse was still there, the campfire embers backdropping him like a foreboding halo. Agaam leaned against the trunk, hands folded across his chest. Lysia was gone.

Jespar spun around and ran.

Only when his lungs burned and his feet hurt from the many cuts and stings in his soles did he stop. The jungle surrounded him, pitch-black except for what little moonlight fell through the canopy.

“Fool,” he said, his breath fast and shallow.

Had he really just run from some hallucination? It had been a hallucination, that much was certain—a tenacious one, fair enough, but still. Dizziness flooded him and he grabbed for support, found a branch, but jerked his hand back when something stung him upon contact.

“Godsdamned fool.”

What was more likely to kill him? Some poisonous rainforest animal biting or stinging his naked feet or another patch of exposed skin, or a ghost from a nightmare that didn’t even exist?

He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms.

The river.

The best way to get back had to be the river. He would find it, then follow it upstream to where they’d taken a bath—there was a rock jutting over the river, shaped like a finger—and take the way back to camp from there.

Closing his eyes, he listened.

There it was, faint, far, but still: the sound of water.

“He wasn’t there,” he said into the humid night. “He wasn’t there.”

Several stings, cuts, and mosquito bites later, Jespar arrived at the river. The forest was still a shapeless mass of black and green under the sphere of the moon, the height of which suggested it’d be a long time until sunrise. With a sigh, he sank on his haunches by the riverbank and drank some water, the Corpse’s stench still in his nostrils. Then he continued upstream. When he arrived at the finger-shaped rock, a voice ripped him from his thoughts.

“Dal’Varek?”

He spun around. Someone sat cross-legged at the ledge of the rock, back straight, hands folded in his lap.

“Kawu?”

Kawu squinted, as if convincing himself Jespar wasn’t a mirage. “How… what are you doing here?”

Jespar started to speak but broke off. *I saw a ghost?* He walked over to Kawu. The canopy was sparser near the river, allowing slivers of moonlight to fall in. "I couldn't sleep, that godsdamned fever is back. And you? I didn't know you went all the way out here."

"Oh, I just… I like the sound of the water. It helps me rest."

"Huh," Jespar said for the lack of a better answer. "Okay. Do you mind if I sit for a moment? I could use some company."

Kawu looked at him as though he didn't understand the question. Then he said, "Of course."

Jespar sat beside him, hanging his legs from the ledge. Grass covered the rock up to the edge, warm and wet under Jespar's palms, droplets of water sprayed at the soles of his feet. Kawu neither turned his head to face him nor scooted over. After it became clear Kawu wouldn't start the conversation, Jespar did. "So," he said, "I actually meant to ask you earlier, but I never got around to it: Ma'saa Oonai said that dreamwalkers never truly sleep the way we do. She said that you're always aware when you're dreaming, just like we were back in Oonai's nightmare. Is that true?"

"*Yuz*."

"What's that like?"

Kawu glanced at him. In the dark, his eyes were a deep green, the color of some plant that only grew at the bottom of the ocean. "Just imagine there's another world that you can enter at your own will. It feels as real as this place, but you're the god of that world and you can shape it at your will… create people and creatures with not so much as a thought or fly like a bird over the landscapes your mind created."

"That sounds intriguing."

Kawu smiled faintly. "I felt the same way when I was a child."

"But not anymore?"

He shook his head. "It's different now. Back then, I used to think that *tuewa*, the other world, was real, but then, when I was thirteen, my mother told me it wasn't. All those people, all those 'friends' I had made in that other world didn't exist. That just…"

"Crushed you?"

"I suppose. I realized I was the king of a world that didn't exist." He looked off. "These days, visiting *tuewa* is mostly a necessity for keeping sane. I don't do much while I'm there, only rest

my mind for the four hours required to keep myself from going mad." He added something under his breath, but the rush of the river drowned his words.

"I didn't catch that."

"Oh, it's… never mind."

"…Okay." Jespar shifted, drawing his right leg up and lacing his fingers across the knee. An animal, some kind of squirrel, hopped up to the riverbank to their feet, noticed them, then rushed back into the forest. "So," Jespar said, "how do your dreams look like, then? Nowadays."

"An ocean."

"An ocean?"

"*Yuz*. A bit like the In-Between, but it's not frozen and the sky is clear and the sun setting. It's just water, as far as the eye can see."

"Interesting. But you could make it anything you like, right? A desert, a city, a forest?"

"I could."

"Then why an ocean?"

Kawu uncrossed his legs, slid up to the ledge, and let his legs hang down. "It's just how I like it. I suppose you could say there's something… calming about that vastness. It's just quiet, myself and no one and nothing else."

Sounds lonely, Jespar thought. "I see."

They sat still, watching the water rush by, a breeze on their skin. The memory of what had happened was still fresh in Jespar's mind but out here, it lost some of its horror. His mind drifted to Lysia. Had she realized he was missing by now?

I should go back, he thought, but for some reason the idea of walking back to the camp and lying back down beside Lysia again unsettled him.

Liar.

It terrified him.

A quiver went into his stomach and the weight in his neck returned. He glanced at Kawu, the profile of his face backdropped by the moonlight the river reflected, his black hair slightly disheveled.

He was about to speak when the headache hit.

Jespar winced, shut his eyes, bit his tongue, a blue veil raging on the insides of his eyelids. When the pain lessened and he opened his eyes again, Kawu studied him, his face clouded.

"I'm okay," Jespar said. He forced a smile. "Really, I am, it's just that fever I've been—"

"What happened tonight?" Kawu asked. "What really happened?"

Jespar blinked. "I don't know what you mean."

"Dal'Varek… please."

Jespar, he thought. *I'm Jespar.*

Then he told him. About his encounter with the Corpse in the bath, about his lingering unease despite Lysia's assurance that it was just an ordinary fever, about his hallucination at the campfire. When he was done, the concern in Kawu's eyes had been replaced by something else: Fear.

"I'm a fool."

Though Jespar knew what would follow next, had known since awaking from Oonai's dreamworld, he asked, "Why?"

"Because I should have known. The dream-eater infected you."

Silence stretched out between them.

"No," Jespar said. "That's not possible."

The heavy-hearted look Kawu gave in place of an answer was what finally broke through the walls of denial.

"But—" Jespar's voice broke. "How?"

Kawu exhaled, drawing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. "I don't know. As I said, all I know about dream-eaters comes from my mother, and she never told me about this… or did she? *Kweh,* I don't remember, I just—" He fell silent.

Jespar began to say something, but his mind was blank.

Infected.

His skin crawled, a million cold, slimy centipedes crawling over his body, headed for his eyes and ears and nostrils and mouth, for an opening into his skull. His wound itched and pulsed and burned under its bandage as if…

Infected.

He pressed his eyes shut, jerked his head as if to shake off the thought.

"I don't understand," Jespar managed at last. "I mean, we were in a dream, right? We were in a dream."

"We were."

"Then how the hell is this possible? How can something… something that I didn't physically get in contact with infect me? This is nonsense." He made a sound that was supposed to be laughter but came out as a croak. "This is nonsense."

"I'm afraid not. See, dream-eaters, they are… different. When normal beings dream, we shift our minds between planes, between *akhara* and *tuewa*. Dream-eaters don't, they exist in both worlds at the same time because they have both a physical and an ethereal body. So, if a dream-eater lays an egg in the real world…"

"…One hatches in *tuewa*," Jespar said, voice flat.

Kawu nodded. "And it must work the other way around too. The moment the dream-eater, its ethereal body, touched you, your consciousnesses connected, and it must have laid an egg in your dreaming self's brain. Which then also formed in the real world."

"…Shit." The image of an egg appeared behind his eyes, sitting inside the tissue of his brain, red and pulsating, a tiny insectoid shape twitching and writhing behind the translucent membrane. His voice fell. "Holy shit."

As if to mock him, the headache flared up again, quick and violent. Jespar winced and pressed the heels of his palms against his forehead until the pain let off.

"Okay," he said at last. "So the same thing that happened to Oonai is going to happen to me. That's the long and short of it, right?"

Kawu's eyes were still fixed on the ground. "Only if we don't cure you."

"But how? We can cure Oonai by finding the imprinted and getting him to release the bug. I understand that, but how do we release one that hasn't even been imprinted on someone?" He forced himself to say it: "How do we release mine?"

The following quiet was tormenting, like a man on the scaffold counting the seconds until the guillotine falls. "I don't know," Kawu said at last. "I wish I did, but I don't. As I said, all my knowledge of dream-eaters comes from my mother, and even she thought I'd never require it."

"There has to be a way," Jespar said. "Just think. Please."

Kawu ran both hands through his hair, lacing them behind his neck, staring into the jungle. "Maybe the broodmother, Oonai's dream-eater, is the imprinted of yours. Maybe if we kill her it will purge her offspring from your brain too."

"Maybe," Jespar said.

"Maybe."

Jespar's head swam. "Can't you just enter my *tuewa* the way you entered Oonai's and deal with the parasite there?"

"How, by killing it? Even if that were possible, you know what happens if a dream-eater dies while in someone's brain: It releases a toxin that kills the host."

"But it has only been two days, right? What if it's still, I don't know… an egg?"

"Even if is, how do you know this makes killing it any less dangerous? Do you really want to take the risk?"

Jespar studied Kawu, then let out a long, weary breath. "So that's it? I'm going to continue losing my mind and then fall into a coma unless we miraculously find the assassin?"

Kawu opened his mouth to speak, but then something flickered across his face. "Look at me. And hold still."

Hesitating, Jespar complied.

Kawu put both his thumbs on the center of Jespar's forehead, his other fingers splayed out and their tips touching Jespar's temples. Then he closed his eyes.

Warmth rushed into Jespar's head, his mind, an exhale of summer sweeping through a cave of ice. Jespar's headache ceased, the light-headedness disappeared. The world snapped back into focus.

Kawu studied him, his fingertips still on Jespar's forehead. They were dry and warm. "How do you feel?"

"…Better," Jespar said. "Good, actually."

"Really?"

"Yes. How on Vyn did you do that? I didn't know you were a light mage."

"I'm not," he said. "I merely restored your focus. It's something I do all the time for my siblings and my father to protect them from my mother's seizures. It anchors your mind to *akhara.*" Kawu withdrew his hands. "I had no idea if this would work on you but seems like it did. I believe the dream-eater takes over its host by gradually pulling his mind into *tuewa,* even while he's awake, that's why you've been having those hallucinations. I restored your grip on the real world, so to speak."

"Does that mean…?"

"You're not cured, no, I only eased the symptoms. I'll have to keep refocusing you until we've dealt with Oonai's dream-eater."

"…I see. Well, thank you."

"It's the least I can do."

Jespar looked off into the jungle, still dark as a funeral veil. Then a strange calm settled in him, optimism and acceptance in equal parts. He knew the feeling: the cards were dealt, the rules explained. All he could do now was play, ignoring the sword at his throat.

"Well," Jespar said, "how goes the saying? If you're chin-up in shit, don't let your head hang down."

Kawu arched his eyebrows.

"It's a joke."

Another second passed until the corners of Kawu's mouth lifted. "Ah. I understand."

Against all odds, Jespar's mood lightened. He picked up a pebble and threw it into the river. It disappeared with a light splash.

And now?

He should go back, he needed the sleep, and, if Lysia or Agaam had noticed his going missing, they'd be worried. Still, something kept him where he was.

"Why are you smiling?" Kawu asked.

"Am I?"

"*Yuz*."

"I don't know. Maybe because, ever since I came here, I seem to have gotten into the habit of relying on other people to save my ass."

"You have?"

"Oh, yes. Before we found you on Yuva, Lysia helped me get rid of something I caught in an inn." *"Caught" is a gallant way of putting it,* he thought. "Now you're here, saving me from… well, from this. Frankly, I'd be a liar if I said this wasn't terrifying, and you're making it a lot more bearable."

Kawu smiled. "I'm just glad I can help."

"That's big of you."

When Kawu lowered his eyes at the compliment, a thought crossed Jespar's mind. "That… bug. It's not infectious, is it?"

"No," he said. "At least not here in *akhara.* The parasite doesn't leave the host's body until… you know."

Parasite. The word echoed.

"Okay. Good to know."

They sat for another minute or two, Jespar picking pebbles from the rock and throwing them into the river. After a while, Kawu spoke up. "May I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"That Corpse from your dreams… he represents someone who used to be close to you, doesn't he?"

The question took Jespar by surprise, but, somehow, the negative emotions that usually came with the topic stayed away. Maybe Kawu's "refocusing" was responsible for it. Maybe it was the fact that Jespar simply liked him.

"My father."

"I thought so."

"Yeah?"

"*Yuz*." Kawu stretched out his legs and moved them, curled and uncurled his toes, probably because they had gone asleep. "In my experience, there's a certain something about people who lost one or both of their parents. A sort of… how should I say? A rootlessness."

Jespar frowned. "Really."

"I didn't mean to offend you. I merely wanted to—"

"You didn't offend me," Jespar said. "It's just that I couldn't be happier that my father is gone. It was probably the best thing that could have happened to me." *To us.*

"…Why?"

"Because he was a self-righteous prick." There was no emotion in Jespar's voice. "See, my father was a judge, one of the thirteen that, together, formed the tribunal of my country. The court of law."

"Like the Coalition's House of Justice?"

"I guess. The thing about my father was that, for him, life was all about his sacred principles, one in particular: 'Justice knows no compromise.'" An odd feeling settled on Jespar's skin as he said the words, like wearing the clothes of an old cadaver.

"That's a good principle," Kawu said.

"Most people think that way, yeah. What they don't understand is that for my father, it was never about actual justice or the well-being of people, but about confirming to himself what a

flawless person, what a paragon of virtue he really was. It's hard to explain—if you had known him you'd understand what I mean. My brothers always said he was different before my mother died during my birth, but I wouldn't know: He'd always give me that reproachful look as if I had committed some terrible crime and barely spoke to me, and, when he did, it was always only about who would succeed him, about responsibility, honor, and manhood, and, of course, about justice." Jespar shook his head. "For him, this was all that ever mattered, and, ultimately, he gave it his all: his own life and that of his family."

"Your family is dead?"

"Most of them, yes. It's a long story and I don't want to bore you, so I'll give you the short version. If you want, that is."

"…I do."

"Well, okay. One day, back when I was sixteen, my father was faced with the choice to either send a criminal to the gallows or let him run free with a fine to be paid to the victims' families. He also knew this man was the son of a powerful crime lord, notorious for his vengefulness, especially when his family was concerned."

"What had this man done? The crime lord's son?"

"He murdered someone…. two women. No question, he was a beast of a person that would have been better off dead, but that's not the point. The point is that my father, well aware of the crime lord's reputation, decided to turn the trial into the biggest spectacle since the Apotheosis of the Light-Born. He was the only one of the thirteen judges voting for the gallows, and he shouted it from the rooftops. Under his eye, no one would escape justice, no matter the title. All hail Damean Dal'Varek the righteous, the epitome of justice."

"And you believe he should have let the man run free?"

"I believe," Jespar said, "that had he wanted the man to die, there would have been smarter ways to do it. Poison, an accident… The Tribunal had the means, and it had done so before if an official execution wasn't in the cards for some reason. But that wasn't an option for my father, of course, he just had to have it his way. So when the judges returned to the courtroom to announce their vote, he proclaimed in that authoritative voice of his that he, unlike the other twelve judges, believed the murderer should go to the gallows and he'd do all in his power to get him there, even if he got away this time. Of course, the crowd went mad."

"But the murderer went free."

"Of course he did—that's how the system works. Which didn't stop the criminal's father from teaching that annoying Judge Dal'Varek a lesson."

"What did he do?"

The last his of inner resistance welled up. When he'd told Lysia the same story, he'd left it vague—particularly the part that followed.

"As a kid," Jespar said, "I had a habit of sneaking out of our manor at night to explore the premises, a couple of times a week. Our governess gave me hell for it whenever she found out, but I didn't care—I loved the freedom of roaming around in the night, albeit it just in the vicinity of our house. There was this one spot I went to each time, a kind of cave. It had this one cavern shaped like a cauldron, all overgrown and open at the top, with moonlight falling in. I could sit there for hours, just looking at the sky, with that sense of… vastness all around me. I just loved it." *And so did she.* He chuckled, but it sounded nervous. "Gods, sounds crazy, doesn't it? A kid sneaking out all on his own, spending the night in some cave."

It hadn't been a real question, but Kawu took it as one. "It might to most people, but I understand it. It's not so different from the place I go to when I dream. Remember?"

"That ocean at sunset."

"*Yuz.* Sometimes the world can get a little overwhelming, so we find ourselves spaces to get away from it all. Sanctuaries."

Jespar studied Kawu—the soft contour of his jaw, his high, arched eyebrows like brushstrokes with blank ink. Only now did he notice a slight discoloration just beneath the lobe of his right ear, where his skin was lighter. Becoming aware of Jespar's attention, both Kawu and Jespar averted their eyes.

"Yeah," Jespar said. "A sanctuary."

Tucking up one knee, he leaned back, the grass damp under his palms. "Anyway. The night of the 'incident,' I had gone out to explore, and when I returned in the early morning, I found our manor in flames, my father, my three older brothers, and our six servants dead and mounted to the walls. For the servants, the assassins had sufficed with slitting their throats, while they had flayed my brothers and my father and placed their skin at their feet."

"By the gods. I'm… I'm so sorry."

"If the gods cared, they kept it to themselves." Though his voice was calm, the line of his jaw showed under his skin and his fingers dug into the ground. "I know I should be angry at the

attackers, and, in a way, I am. But to tell you the truth, if anyone is to blame for this, it's my father."

"Because of his verdict?"

"Because he willfully placed his ego over the lives of his family. He knew the verdict might cost him and us our lives, he knew the criminal's father practically *had* to retaliate to protect his reputation, and yet he did it. And guess what, after it happened, they all celebrated him as the tragic hero, put up a statue in the Tribunal's atrium, said that the world would be a better place if there were more people like him. Would it, though? Would the world really be a better place if everybody chose the satisfaction of their own ego over the people who trusted them? No. My father was a self-absorbed, cruel narcissist, and eleven innocent lives paid the price for it. And even now, in death, he won't leave me alone. He just won't."

Kawu eyed him quietly, the sounds of the jungle and the passing water all that marred the silence. "Have you ever wondered if perhaps you get this nightmare because your father wants something from you?"

"My father is dead," Jespar said. "He doesn't want anything."

"I meant symbolically. I don't know, maybe there's something you need to do in order to stop the nightmares and close that chapter of your past."

"Oh, trust me, I closed it long ago." It came out harsher than intended. "But thank you for caring," he added, meaning it, but in a tone that made clear he didn't want to pursue the conversation.

Kawu didn't seem to mind, and a long silence followed. When he spoke again, something about his expression had changed, like hard clay softened by rainfall. "You know, I'm an egotist too."

"Huh?"

"I'm an egotist too. Me being here… it's pure selfishness."

Jespar tilted his head. "Didn't you come here because you want to allow your family and your people a better life?"

Kawu gave him a hollow smile. "That's only part of the reason."

"Okay, yeah, you want a share of the riches yourself. Who wouldn't?"

"It's not about that."

"What then?"

Kawu sighed then turned to face Jespar. “I wanted to get away from it all. From my father, from my mother, from my siblings, from everything… no more screams from my mother in the middle of the night, no more tears from Ekha and Guwi because they had to go to bed with empty stomachs again, no more carrying my father up the slope to our house because he’s too proud again to admit he’s a cripple and tried to go into town all by himself. I’m so tired of it, Dal’Varek, so tired of working all around the clock just so we don’t starve, so tired of giving that lonely, sad old man I work for the smiles that keep him thinking I see him as more than just my employer. I’m tired of always having to be the ‘brave one’ because I’m the only one in my family still able to be that person.”

His eyes shone, but there were no tears. Jespar felt the urge to reach out to him, to comfort him, but he didn’t move.

“And do you know the worst of it? I thought I’d feel guilty about turning my back on them the moment I boarded that ship of yours, but the truth is I’m enjoying it. Despite all that’s happened, despite what we’re doing, I enjoy being away, I enjoy not having to think about them. All this…” He made a vague hand gesture. “It’s just an excuse.” He flicked Jespar a brief glance, and it seemed as if he wanted to add something. Then he shook his head. “I’m not brave, Dal’Varek, I’m the opposite. I’m a coward, I’m weak, and I’m selfish.”

Only a couple of seconds passed before Kawu’s cheeks reddened. He dropped his gaze. “*Kweh*, I’m… I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have…”

Jespar put his hand on Kawu’s. “It’s all right. Really.”

At first, Kawu tensed, but kept his hand where it was.

“You know, it’s funny,” Jespar said.

“What?”

“How most people always have such skewed perceptions of themselves. You’re not a coward, Kawu, you’re not weak, and you’re not selfish. At the risk of sounding dramatic, you’re probably one of the bravest people I know.”

“Please, don’t… you don’t need to say this.”

“I’m saying it because it’s true. Look, even if part of your motivation for taking this job was to get a break from it all, so what? Everybody would feel the same in your position. And when all this is over, you’ll not only have played a role in preventing a civil war but will return to your family a rich man. Do you understand? Your siblings will never go to bed hungry again, you can

buy a big house for all of you, and even hire a medicus, a light mage, or a Starling tinkerer to help out your father."

"But—"

"No, Kawu, results matter, not intentions. I'll say it again, who cares *why* you saved your family if you did save them? The gods? Some vague, omniscient entity that judges people by their motivations and not by what comes of them? Highly doubtful if you ask me. The only person turning this into a problem is you."

"But you just told me that the only reason your family is dead is because of your father's egotism."

"No," Jespar said, "they are dead because my father put his intentions before the results. To him, getting his stupid way was more important than the cost of it. That's selfishness, Kawu, not you enjoying a respite from something that shouldn't have been your responsibility in the first place. Just… don't feel guilty for being human. There's no shame in putting yourself first for a change, especially not if no one suffers from it."

For a while, Kawu said nothing. Then he turned his hand palm up so that their fingers interlaced. A prickle wandered up Jespar's arm, the knowledge of the parasite in his brain pushed far into the recesses of his mind. "Thank you, Dal'Varek. For saying this."

Jespar grinned. "You just saved my sanity, so a bit of readjusting of your perspective is the least I can do. Now, can I ask you a favor? It's something I've been meaning to ask you for a long time, but I was never sure how you'd respond to it."

Deliberately or subconsciously, Kawu's grip on Jespar's hand tightened. "What?"

"Will you finally start calling me Jespar?"

Kawu looked at Jespar, eyes slightly widened. Then a smile split his lips, the brightest one Jespar had yet seen him wear. "All right," he said, "Jespar." He said the name slowly and deliberately, as if pronouncing a foreign word. "Jespar."

"That's my name."

Grinning, Jespar looked off again. *A sanctuary.* Somehow, they'd managed to together push all their worries away, had created their own little bubble of safety, out here in the moonlit jungle at the foot of Mount Kaâra.

"Jespar?" Kawu said.

"Hm?"

"If selfishness is choosing your own ambitions over results, then you were wrong: I am selfish. Not because of my family, but because of something else."

Jespar said nothing, just looked at Kawu.

"I—" Kawu began but broke off with a nervous chuckle. "*Kweh,* this is absurd. This isn't the time nor the place."

"Tell me."

The uncertainty on Kawu's face remained a breath longer then it crumbled. "The priestess, Varroy," he said. "I think I know how she feels about you, and I know you feel for her. And I believe she's good for you."

Jespar listened, his mouth dry.

You promised her.

You promised.

"Still… this?" Kawu continued, glancing at their locked hands. "I… I like it. And I also like how you look at me sometimes, like the things you say, like how we… I don't know, how we simply understand each other and how you don't feel 'it.' I like how you treat me as if I were normal."

He paused, took a breath. "I've never felt this way before, and I know I shouldn't, because I don't want to endanger the mission by driving a wedge between you two. I know Varroy doesn't like me very much because she, like everyone else, feels my gift, but I also know she's a good woman and you're important to her. I just… I don't know what to do." He glanced up but looked away when their eyes met. "By the gods, I'm sorry. You must have a million things on your mind, and here I am bothering you with this nonsen—"

Jespar leaned over and kissed him. At first, Kawu froze, then, gingerly, he kissed back. Jespar cupped his neck, pulled him closer, kissed him deeper, their tongues searching, touching, both demanding, both reluctant. When Jespar withdrew, there was a glazed look in Kawu's eyes but a smile on his lips.

The spell broke.

Releasing each others' hands, they sat side by side until Jespar broke the silence. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

"I…"

"I'll talk to her," Jespar said. "Okay? I'll talk to Lysia."

"You… will?"

"Yeah. You're right, she and I have something going, but I don't think it's that important to her anyway. When it first happened, she even said she wasn't looking for anything serious."

"So she doesn't want marriage?"

Jespar smiled. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Oh. Well, I… guess your people do things differently."

"Some do."

A grasshopper landed on Kawu's lap, wiggled its feelers, then sprang away.

"I'll talk to her," Jespar repeated. "First thing in the morning."

"You don't have to."

Jespar turned to face Kawu. He looked strangely helpless in the blanched moonlight, that sullen sense of maturity, far too much for his age, gone and replaced by an almost adolescent shyness.

"I want to, Kawu. I—" He faltered, not knowing how to finish the sentence. "This feels right to me too."

Again Kawu's smile resurfaced. Jespar took Kawu's hand again. "I think this much is okay."

Kawu first hesitated then slid his fingers back between Jespar's. They remained so for some heartbeats. Then Jespar reclined, gently pulling Kawu with him so that they lay on their backs, the night sky a dome far above them, like an upturned sea of ink-black water populated by thousands of luminescent, frozen creatures too strange for man to fathom.

Lysia.

When he'd made her that promise in the ziggurat, he'd meant it. Now, all that remained when he thought of her was the image of the Corpse, his threadbare, dirt- and piss-stained robes, the boneless, soft feel of his body, like mushrooms shrunken and made mushy by the humid heat.

A hallucination, Jespar thought, but it changed nothing. Whatever he'd felt for Lysia, his father, a dead man from a dream, had found it and killed it. He had become her. She had become him.

Tomorrow. He'd tell her his feelings had changed, tell her about the kiss and apologize, and she'd understand.

Wasn't it all, as Kawu had said, absurd anyway?

Here he lay, just having learned he had a dream-eater's egg in his brain and the fate of a country on their shoulders yet pondering about the resolution of a love affair. *Or maybe,* he thought, *that is precisely the point. Anything is better to worry about than your own impeding madness.*

"Kawu?"

Kawu kept his eyes on the sky. "*Yuz*?"

"I'd like to ask you for a favor."

"*Yuz*?"

"Please don't tell Lysia or Agaam about my… illness. I know it's irrational, but I don't want them to know until it's absolutely necessary."

Jespar expected protest, or at least a question. Instead, Kawu said, "All right. As long as you regularly let me perform the refocusing."

"I'd be a fool not to. Thank you."

Their eyes locked again, and Jespar felt an urge to hold him, kiss him. He didn't. They looked back at the stars, where the moon lazily sunk west. Jespar's mind was at ease, thinking nothing, just existing, his limbs growing heavy with the sleep slowly closing his wings over him like some great, benevolent avian specter.

"Jespar?"

"Hm?"

"When all this is over, can I come with you?"

Opening a drowsy eye, Jespar glanced at Kawu. "You mean—"

"Just for a couple of moons," Kawu said. "You've said it yourself, haven't you? When all this is over, I'll be rich. I could hire someone to look after my family while I'm gone, I'd get them a beautiful place to live on another island, away from the fog, maybe on Viyuuo." He spoke faster, his voice lighter. "I'd send my father to the best medicus, and I'd hire a teacher for Ekha and Guwi so they can work for the Coalition when they're older. I mean, they'll probably be grateful for a couple of moons without their big brother always watching over their shoulders and reprimanding them. I really think this could work—we could simply see where our travels take us." He hesitated. "Unless you don't want to, of course."

"I'd love that."

There was a short pause. "When all this is over then?"

Smiling, Jespar closed his eyes. “When all this is over.”

Chapter 13

Masks

THEY STAYED ON THE FINGER-SHAPED ROCK UNTIL DAWN, hands locked and slipping in and out of a peaceful slumber. Only when the morning insects began to chirp did a deep sense of dread resurface in Jespar and slowly crumble the quiet calm he'd been feeling.

Infected.

"…No," Jespar muttered. Kawu gave a sleepy mumble. "No."

Jespar reached for his pipe then realized he'd left it at camp. After a moment's consideration he slipped his hand out of Kawu's, got to his feet, and stripped off his shirt.

Kawu sat up beside him, eyes bleary and a cowlick on the side of his head. "Jespar…?"

Jespar flicked him a smile. "Just getting a cooling."

He dived head first into the river, the blue enfolding him and rinsing off the sweat of the night. He stood under water for as long as he could, and when he resurfaced, the sleepiness was gone and the dread was back at the bottom of his mind where he wanted it. He began to swim with light breast strokes, counterbalancing the gentle current that had carried him slightly away from the rock where Kawu stood, squinting in his direction with worry all over his face.

A grin tugged at the corners of Jespar's mouth. "Come on in!"

Kawu dithered for a breath or two but then stripped off his tunic and followed his example, diving into the water with surprising agility. He swam over to Jespar, stopping just an arm-length away from him, and Jespar had to suppress the urge to laugh as he once more realized the absurdity of it all, him splashing about in a river and acting like a lovestruck boy while not only the fate of an entire country but his own survival rested on his shoulders.

"Great, isn't it?"

Smiling, Kawu nodded.

Jespar dived under and let himself sink all the way down to the riverbed, where he sat cross-legged, feeling the water on his skin and watching shoals of tiny, colorful fish pass him by. When he broke the surface, Kawu was still where he was, watching him with crinkling eyes.

Though the sun hadn't risen by the time they returned to the camp, the sky was light enough for them to find their way back with ease. Halfway there, they heard Lysia's voice cutting through the rainforest and calling Jespar's name. They met her and Agaam halfway, and when Lysia noticed them, she stopped abruptly.

"Jespar."

"As I told you," Agaam said. "He's all right."

"Looks like it," Lysia said, her eyes wandering from Jespar to Kawu and back to Jespar. Kawu's cheeks flushed. "Where were you? We were worried."

"I, uhm, went for a swim. *We* did."

"Must have been a long one. We were waiting for over an hour until we started looking."

"Sorry," Jespar said. "I should have told you." He hesitated then added: "Actually, do you mind if we talk?"

Kawu and Agaam went ahead to the camp to saddle the horses while Lysia and Jespar stayed behind. Lysia listened quietly while Jespar talked, and when he was done, she nodded and said, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah," Lysia said. "Thanks for telling me, and thanks for being upfront about the kiss. I appreciate that."

"So… you don't mind?"

Lysia smiled sourly. "Well, I'm not going to do somersaults and throw confetti to mark the occasion, but yeah, it's all right. I mean, what else can I do anyway? You made up your mind. Not to mention that there's not much one can respond to 'I had a nightmare in which you turned into a corpse,' is there?"

The weight materialized in the back of Jespar's neck again. He wanted to leave, but forced himself to stay. "I know how it sounds, that's really how it happened. I… I have no idea why—" *Liar*—"but it's as if elements of my dreams have started leaking into reality. Kawu did something that should help me with that, though, so hopefully it won't happen again."

"Hopefully," Lysia said. There was no sarcasm in her voice.

Jespar raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Look, Lysia, I know I messed up. I shouldn’t have done what I did, not after promising you I wouldn’t, but it just…”

Lysia held up a hand. “I told you, it’s all right. Now, do you mind if we postpone this until after the mission? We have a civil war to prevent and a life to save.”

Two lives, Jespar thought. He said, “Fair enough.”

They returned to the clearing in silence, and glancing at Lysia as they walked, Jespar briefly wondered whether he had made the right decision. At camp, he told Kawu about the conversation. Like Lysia, he listened silently, hands folded at his waist and his eyes downcast.

“I shouldn’t have interfered,” Kawu said when he was done. “I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“If anyone hurt her, it was me. Also, I don’t think Lysia is the kind of woman bothered by this kind of thing too much. Her mind is on the mission.”

Kawu gave him a grateful smile. It was a good smile, one that Jespar hoped to see on him more often. “I see. When all this is over then.”

“When all this is over.”

They broke fast, and before they left, Kawu refocused Jespar once more to protect against the influence of the dream-eater. Then they applied some of Lysia’s sun paste and set out for Kaâra Manor—and answers.

Unlike Mount Uunil, which was a single, massive, steep chunk of green shooting toward the sky, Mount Kaâra encompassed four smaller, flatter mountains surrounded by a diaspora of hills and slopes, all covered by dense jungle. As Kaâra Manor was situated on the tallest of the four peaks, they had to skirt the outer mountains first to get farther inland, which meant hours and hours of uphill ride through the jungle. It didn’t help that the day turned into one of the hottest yet, and though the jungle canopy provided some shadow the sticky humidity made up for that advantage tenfold. Soon, Jespar felt as if they were slogging through the maw of some giant amphibian.

Four hours in, with the noon heat approaching fast and Jespar’s chest and armpits itching maddeningly from the accumulating sweat, the rainforest finally thinned out and opened into a rocky overlook. A vast dell unfolded beneath it, nestled between the mountain they’d been climbing and two other peaks, one of which must be Mount Kaâra. On a precipice a third of the way up stood the palace.

Somehow, the word "manor" had made Jespar think of something like the house he'd grown up in: pitched, slated roof; arched windows; maybe three stories. It wasn't. Atop that precipice sat another ziggurat with its stacked tiers of white stone, only this one had but six stories instead of twenty. Both enthralled and estranged by the view, Jespar shook his head. The cost of supplying a place like this so far from the next city alone must have been enough to motivate a hundred more peasants to join the ranks of the Scythe, not to mention the staff of servants and guards.

A handful of smaller buildings clustered around the manor, probably the servants' quarters, and a crescent shaped wall spanned around the entire side facing the dell. The property surrounding it featured a sprawling, colorful orchard and what seemed to be a hedge maze. Dipped in the light of the setting sun, there was an unreal quality to the place, like a *Fata morgana* spawned by the mind of a famished traveler.

"I guess that's it," Jespar said. He wiped sweat off his chin, only to feel it form anew an instant later.

"*Yuz*, Dal'Varek," Agaam said. He spoke flatly, and there was a distant look in his eyes. "Kaâra Manor."

It took them another five hours to cross the dell and climb the narrow path that spiraled up the precipice. By the time they approached the gate, a gentle rain had begun to fall, the first time since Jespar's arrival in Kilé. The sunset light tinged the drizzle crimson, like liquid oozing from some blood-drenched organ.

Agaam jerked up a hand.

"Wait."

"What's wrong?" Lysia asked while Agaam dismounted. She'd spoken little throughout the day and had spent most of the time looking off into the jungle.

Agaam nodded at the gate, an arch of wrought iron embedded in the wall. It stood open.

Jespar squinted ahead, but from the distance, nothing seemed amiss.

Except, he realized, *that there's no one there.*

Lysia dismounted, and Kawu and Jespar followed her example.

"You should stay here," Lysia told Agaam. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I." Agaam drew a curved, sheathed blade around twice the size of Jespar's daggers from his saddlebag, ignoring the group's surprised looks. "Let's leave our horses here and move. Boy, you're coming along too."

Jespar flicked Kawu a worried glance. "He should stay… it's too dangerous."

"Not any more dangerous than out here when night falls and the predators come out."

As if that settled the matter, Agaam crossed to the gate. After a brief hesitation, they followed him.

They came across the first corpse in the orchard. A gravel path wound its way from the gate to the ziggurat entrance, meandering through a carefully crafted composition of palms, other trees, bushes, and flowerbeds. The body was that of a man, short and wiry, balding but with a ponytail. He knelt slumped before a square fountain around a statue of Oonai, his head resting on the rim of the basin. Dried blood on the stone tinged the water a pale red. Kawu covered his mouth, uttering something in Makehu. Jespar swallowed in a dry throat.

On the coast, Jespar had seen Kiléan fishermen kill living squid they had fished by smashing them repeatedly against a rock in order to burst all of their nine brains. Whoever had killed the servant must have done something similar. His head was caved in, battered into an unrecognizable pulp.

"Hell," Jespar muttered.

Agaam sank on his haunches and eased the dead man onto his back, exposing the full extent of the injury. While Lysia paled, Kawu gagged but managed to keep the bile in.

"You knew him?" Lysia asked Agaam.

The old servant nodded. "That's Ejkaan, head servant of Mount Kaâra for the past ten years." His voice sounded even flatter than before. He stood. "The murderers might still be on the premises. Come."

They crossed the orchard, following Agaam's lead and always staying in the cover of the trees. For some reason, Jespar's sudden trust in a man whose expertise presumably lay in organizing servants and serving breakfast to the First Magnate had not once struck him as odd, and Lysia seemed to feel the same—almost as if the part of their brain responsible for critical thinking had been subdued.

Four more corpses marked the way to the entrance, two Blue Guards lying face down in the gravel of one of the clearings that interspersed the orchard at regular intervals, the other two a

woman and a boy Agaam identified as the cook and her son. They sat propped against the trunk of a giant fig tree, the boy's head resting against his mother's shoulder, his throat cut, her neck snapped to a bizarre angle. Backdropped by the nocturnal garden and drenched in the last slivers of sunlight, they looked like the motif of some morbid, yet beautiful painting.

Lysia stared at them with glassy eyes. "Who on Vyn would do this?"

Jespar averted his eyes. "Someone who doesn't want to leave any witnesses."

When they arrived at the bottom of the staircase that led up to the first level of the manor, Agaam had drawn his blade from its sheath. It turned out to be a kris, a dagger shaped like a slithering snake, the blade the shimmering turquoise of nuvium. Jespar and Lysia had readied their weapons as well, while Kawu stuck close to Jespar's heels, his posture upright but his breath coming at short intervals.

A few steps from the portal, Agaam raised his hand again and closed his good eye. For a breath, the hair on Jespar's arm stood up as a peculiar sense of presence passed him by, as if an invisible entity had rushed past him and into the manor.

Agaam turned to face them. "The lobby is clear."

With a doubtful glance on their faces, they followed him inside, but Jespar halted when he noticed Kawu still stood motionless at the bottom of the stairs, eyes transfixed on the floor.

"Kawu?"

"…So much suffering."

"Huh?"

His gaze met Jespar's, his eyes glassy. "I'm sorry, it's just… never mind. Let us go."

Agaam and Lysia awaited them in the lobby, a chamber with a high ceiling, the walls lit with flaming sconces, the floor a mosaic of blue and gold. Several corpses cluttered the ground, some servants, some guards. An imperial staircase faced the entrance at the far end of the room, its two mirrored treads arching around a fountain and leading to the upper floor. A statue of Jaaros Oonai stood in the center of the fountain basin, dressed in flowing robes and wearing his seven-horned crown, face turned skyward and palms raised.

Lysia held up a hand. "Do you hear that?"

A faint mix of voices wafted through the room, seemingly originating from somewhere on the upper floor. Agaam gestured to the staircase. Carefully, they crossed the room and climbed the stairs, holding their breaths, placing each step with care. The voices were louder on the second

floor. Jespar let his gaze wander across the room, over the luxurious furniture, the paintings on the walls, the busts, and stopped at a small corridor to their left that appeared to be where the voices came from. They followed it, the voices growing louder the farther they got. They belonged to two women and a man, and while one of the women cried and had the typical Kiléan inflection, the other two were perfectly calm. Jespar didn't recognize the accent.

After a turn left, the corridor ended in a large door that stood ajar. Corpses fronted it, a man and a young woman, the carpet sucking up their blood like parched soil did the first rain after a drought.

Signaling the others to wait, Agaam snuck to the door, stepping over the man's body. Somehow, he managed to do all that without a single sound, as though his clothes had decided not to rustle at his behest. He peeked through the crack then motioned Jespar over.

The room behind the door was small and cramped, walled by bookshelves. An ornamented desk stood in the center, facing the entrance, a row of windows with iron rods woven into floral patterns for grates behind it. Before the desk knelt a young woman with short, black hair and a white tunic and linen pants smeared by blood. Two people loomed over her, their backs to the door.

"…nothing!" the girl sobbed. "*Saaras'Jodule*, I told you!"

"And I," the woman said, "don't believe you."

Before the girl had a chance to reply, the woman slapped her face, sending her flat on the tiles. Then the woman squatted down before her. Like her companion, a brute of a man, she wore a angular armor made of dark leather, and wore a hood. A dagger twice the size of Jespar's hung from her belt.

"You want to know what I think? I think you're holding back out of fear of what your master will do if you tell us what we want to know."

"Please…" the girl sobbed. "Please."

The woman sighed. "So stubborn. All right… where do we start, I wonder? Pulling out the fingernails, maybe? Conservative, yes, but works more often than you'd think. What do you think, Cvek?"

The man mumbled something Jespar didn't catch.

"Hm. Fair point."

She yanked up the girl's head by her hair. Jespar thought she'd break her neck, but then she ran her other hand down the girl's face instead. It took Jespar a moment to realize that the woman had claws attached to her glove, leaving a trail of bloody ravines in the girl's skin. She screamed.

Agaam's nostrils twitched. Again, a shiver ran down Jespar's arms, as if he'd been brushed by a current of electricity. The old servant looked first at him then Lysia, and ran his index finger across his throat.

Only hours ago, Jespar might have questioned the old servant's orders. Now, almost as if he'd followed him into battle for years, Jespar just nodded and readied his daggers, assuming a steady position.

Kawu sobbed.

The hooded woman dropped the girl and shot to her feet, whirling around to face the door. The bulky man drew a two-handed sword from his back, smooth and effortless as if it were a twig.

Jespar kicked open the door.

He'd hoped his fast reaction would at least startle the attackers, but it didn't. Before he knew it, the bulky man came for him, bringing down his sword in a powerful overhead swing. Jespar's reflexes kicked in milliseconds before the blade reached his skull. He dodged back, feeling the momentum of the split air in his face.

Holy shit.

In the instant between his dodge and the bulky man realizing he missed, Jespar noticed something odd about his opponent's face—a human face, human skin, but oddly motionless. Clouded by battle fervor, Jespar couldn't make sense of it.

Lysia darted past him, going for the hooded woman who simultaneously lunged at Jespar, her dagger outstretched. Lysia averted the blow by bringing her baton down on the woman's arm, but while the impact should have had enough force to shatter her bones, it merely stopped the thrust.

The bulky man swung again. Jespar sidestepped, sunk his right dagger into the man's side, but like Lysia's attack it had almost no effect. Instead, the man smashed his knee into Jespar's guts, driving the air from his lungs and sending him reeling. His sight blackened, stars dancing behind his eyelids. Jespar fought for balance, fell, his head coming down hard on the stone floor.

Gasping for air, he tried to get up, saw Agaam standing in the door frame, his eyes fixed on Jespar. Somewhere next to him, Lysia uttered a cry.

The bulky man now stood over him, his sword raised to deliver the killing blow. Though his instinct screamed for him to get up, to dodge, to *survive*, Jespar couldn't help but stare at the face under the hood and finally understood why it looked so strange—it was a face, yes, real skin, but it wasn't the man's own but that of a corpse, sewn onto a mask.

The blade came down.

Chapter 14

Overgrowth

NOTHING HAPPENED. His sword pointed at Jespar's chest, the assassin stood over him. Two dark pools focused him from between the eye slits of the assassin's skin mask, moving, but as inanimate as the dead face he wore.

His eyes glassed over.

For a heartbeat, the assassin didn't move. Then he flipped his sword around and drove the tip into his throat. It was a perfectly executed motion—surgical precision, with just the right amount of pressure so the blade neither stopped at the skin nor yanked through his neck. It simply went in one end and out the other. Briefly, he just stood there, blood trickling from the wound, running down the hilt of the sword, and dripping onto Jespar's trousers. Then, he fell over backward. The sword pushed out of his neck upon impact, releasing a gush of blood.

Jespar remained where he was, staring at the giant's body at his feet. The blood boiled in his veins and bile tickled at his throat.

What the hell?

Scooping up his daggers from the floor, Jespar scrambled to his feet and floundered away from the corpse, his blades pointed at it as if the man's suicide had been part of some bizarre feint. Only when the man remained dead, Jespar's breathing calmed. As if awaking from a dream, he looked around.

Lysia sat slumped against one of the bookshelves, one blood-stained hand across her stomach, her hair in tangles and her baton some arm-lengths from her on the ground. The woman with the claw glove lay face-down before her, torso on Lysia's knees and her face resting on her lap in some grotesque parody of maternal consolation. She was as dead as her companion.

What the hell.

Whoever those two had been, neither Jespar nor Lysia had stood a sliver of a chance against them. They'd just been too fast, too strong, too tough—machines trained for killing. What on the face of Vyn had just happened?

"It's over," Agaam said from behind them.

Jespar turned around. "I—" He broke off. "You did this?"

Agaam merely gave a nod in response, as if no more explanation was necessary. "Where's the servant? The one they were torturing?"

With a trance-like expression, Lysia tipped her chin at the enormous desk before the window front. Shallow breaths and a soft whimper came from behind the desk. "Over there." She tucked up her knees, pushing the assassin's body off her with her right foot in the process, then shakily got up, holding onto the bookshelf for support.

"Hold on," Jespar said. "Not that I'm complaining, but what *was* that? Did you make that guy kill himself?"

"Not just him," Lysia said. "That woman stuck her claws right up her own jaw."

Agaam gave them an almost annoyed glance, as if their questions were unreasonable. "Psionics." He crossed to the desk. "I guided their hands, if you will. It took me a lot longer to get into their minds than expected… otherwise I would have never let the situation get so precarious."

Psionics. The magic school of mind control, illusions, psychokinesis, the school that counted as the second hardest to master among all five, and that was forbidden anywhere in the Civilized World except for in the magic guilds of Qyra.

"Who are you, Agaam?" Jespar said from a dry throat, following the old servant around the desk.

Agaam sank to his haunches in front of the servant. She was shaking all over, sobbing uncontrollably, her eyes fixed on some point on the ceiling. If she was aware of their presence, she didn't show it.

"I'm just what you think I am," Agaam said. "A servant. But let us have this conversation later."

Though he phrased it as a request, his words carried the same air of command they had back in the orchard, their tone cutting right into some primordial part of Jespar's brain. Jespar fought it briefly then he sighed and let the matter rest. Agaam was right. Now wasn't the time.

"She's experiencing battle shock," Lysia said, walking up beside them.

"Indeed," Agaam said. "I will handle this. Dal'Varek, would you go look for the dreamwalker? Ma'sao Nākhani?"

Kawu.

Jespar turned, finding the corridor empty. His stomach curled. "Where did he go?"

"He ran off during the fight," Agaam said, putting his hands on the woman's forehead. Her skin was tanned and weather-beaten, the complexion of someone who had spent many hours outside. With Agaam's touch, her sobbing calmed a little. "Panic, I presume. Just go look for him; he shouldn't be far."

Lysia knelt beside Agaam. She had two parallel cuts on her underarm, but that seemed the extent of her injures. "What if there are more of those assassins around? Whoever they are?"

"They are Petrified," Agaam said. "Hired killers from your homeland, Varroy, the best in the world."

"… Those were Petrified?"

"*Yuz*, I fought against them once before. But those two were the only ones here in the manor, I can sense it. Now, please, Ma'sao Dal'Varek, find Nākhani, and we'll take care of the woman in the meantime. She might have the answers we're looking for."

Jespar went back down into the lobby, ignoring the pain in his shoulder wound from Yuva—when the assassin had pushed him over, he'd fallen right on the bandage.

Now that the danger was gone, walking through the silent manor was haunting, as if there was still a glimmer of conscience left in the eyes of the dead the assassins had left behind and as if those eyes watched Jespar with sorrow, envy, or even spite as he passed by, he who lived while they had died in this senseless butchery whose purpose they probably hadn't known and never would.

In the lobby, Jespar leaned over the balustrade of the gallery and looked for Kawu. He wasn't there. Jespar called for him.

No reaction.

He was about to head down the stairs when he noticed a toppled vase in front of a corridor across from him. He followed it, arriving at a spiral staircase that appeared to connect all six stories of the manor. Following a hunch, Jespar went up to the third floor and crossed a dining chamber, a library, and an indoor garden. There were six more corpses, four guards and two more servants, both of the latter women in their twenties.

He found Kawu in a sleeping chamber, cowering against the banister on its balcony, hugging his legs and head sunk on his knees. The orchard and the hedge maze spread out beneath, crickets and katydids sang into the ink black sky.

"Kawu?"

Kawu jerked up, his eyes widening. When he recognized Jespar, he relaxed. "Gods… Jespar. You're alive?"

Jespar approached him, his boots spattering softly in the puddles the afternoon rain had left on the balcony. "I guess. Unless undead look a lot better than they used to."

Kawu lowered his eyes. "I… I'm sorry. When the fighting started, I was sure those murderers would kill you and Varroy both, and I panicked."

"They *would* have killed us if it hadn't been for Agaam." A step from Kawu, Jespar offered his hand. Hesitating, Kawu took it and allowed Jespar to pull him up.

"Did you say Agaam?" Kawu said.

"Yes, he saved us. He's more than just a servant."

"I've had my suspicions." Kawu exhaled. "Jespar… I'm so sorry I ran. But, when it happened, I just, I don't know, I lost it." He bit his lip, eyes downcast. "Gods, I'm such a coward. I left you there to die."

Jespar took Kawu in his arms. At first, Kawu tensed—then, breath by breath, his muscles relaxed and he settled into the embrace, slipping his arms around Jespar's waist and resting his face against his chest. They held each other for what must have been a minute; then, Jespar let go. He tried to smile. "Those were two world-class assassins… I'm glad you ran."

Kawu didn't look up. "Okay."

"Also, the manor is clear now, at least according to Agaam. Everything's all right."

Kawu sighed and turned his gaze back to the landscape stretching out beyond the banister. "Not for the people they killed. Gods, Jespar, how does someone become like that?"

"Like what?"

"Well, you said you believe that whoever sent those assassins was trying to protect a secret, didn't you? Assuming you're right, how does a person get from being a child with a mother and father to someone who accepts the death of so many innocents just to get his will? I mean… how does one become so detached? Are some people just 'evil' to start with, or do they become this way?"

"… Huh. Interesting."

"What?"

"Lysia asked me the same thing, not too long ago."

"And what did you tell her?"

"That I think it's a matter of perspective. The longer we live, the more we create some kind of narrative for our lives, like a lens through which we perceive the world… and some of those lenses are pretty distorted and messed up, I guess."

"Lenses that say it's okay to kill people if it serves your ends."

"Apparently. Then again, I might be wrong. Maybe some people just start bad."

Kawu thought on this for a while. "I see."

Jespar took Kawu's hand and pressed it lightly. "Let's just go back downstairs, okay? We saved the woman they were interrogating, and Agaam thinks she can give us some an—"

Blue fog fell over his eyes, numbing, dizzying, an invisible hand trying to yank its consciousness out of his skull. Jespar gasped, grabbed the banister with both hands—it must have been the banister, he couldn't see—fought the hand, fought the fog. For several heartbeats, the struggle went on, then the fog disappeared and Jespar became aware of the sharp, cold fire in his forehead and the nausea at the back of his throat. He shut his eyes, clenched his teeth. Someone, it must have been Kawu, supported him by his shoulder, but he barely felt the touch. At last, the pain let up, leaving Jespar disoriented and his eyes burning, as if he'd just awoken from a twelve-hour sleep.

He tried to say something, but only a croak came out.

"The fever," Kawu said.

Jespar nodded weakly.

Kawu's face darkened.

"Hold still."

He placed his fingertips against Jespar's forehead, sending a rush of warmth through his head. What remained of the pain faded, together with the dizziness.

Jespar drew a long breath. "Thanks," Jespar said. "That was… it was never that strong before."

Kawu studied him, then looked away. It might have been the light, but he seemed paler than he had just a moment before. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

"It'll be all right," Jespar said. "As long as you keep refocusing me, I'll hold out until we—"

"It shouldn't have worn off already. Normally, a refocusing lasts at least two full days, and I did yours no more than thirteen hours ago."

A trail of cold ran down Jespar's neck. "Maybe something interfered with your last refocusing? The heat, maybe, or the exhaustion?"

"No."

"Then… why didn't it work?"

"It did work, Jespar, just not nearly as well as it should have. Maybe it… oh, *kweh*. What a cursed mess."

"'Maybe it…' what?"

"I don't know."

"Kawu, talk to me. Please."

Kawu sighed, ran a hand through his hair. "I think the dream-eater is gaining strength because it's getting closer to hatching. That's why the fever attack was so strong and why the refocusing wasn't as effective."

Jespar blinked. "… Are you sure?"

Kawu's lips pressed into a line. "No, Jespar, I'm not… I'm not sure about anything with this mess. What I know, though, is that we can't take the risk. From here on in, I'll refocus you every four hours, and will stay with you at all times to react in case you get another attack. There's no

way to know for sure, but I believe those hallucinations you have are always preceded by a fever attack—you had one right after we woke up from Oonai's *tuewa*, then the hallucination the same night in the bathtub. The same yesterday, a fever attack at the crossroads tavern, a hallucination some hours later while you were asleep. It's almost as if… I don't know, as if those fever attacks punch holes in your waking mind through which the dream-eater sends elements of your dreams into reality." His frown deepened. "Or maybe it's the other way around and he's trying to send your waking mind into your *tuewa* instead, little by little."

Infected.

A sour taste rose in Jespar's throat. He swallowed it down. "In other words, if it weren't for the refocusings, I'd be seeing ghosts right now?"

"Your mind would project more and more elements of your dreams into reality, yuz."

Looking away, Jespar made a sound that was half scoff and half laugh. He closed his eyes, massaged his temples.

"Okay, but as long as you're near to perform the refocusings, we're fine, right? All we need to do is find Oonai's killer as fast as we can."

Kawu only nodded.

"Well, that's something. We can do this, I'm sure… we'll be fine." He'd hoped the last sentence would sound optimistic, but there was a desperate edge to it that only made it worse.

"I'll do all I can," Kawu said. "I promise. But you have to tell the others about it, they need to know what's going on."

Jespar felt himself tense at the idea, but, this time, he didn't argue. "Okay, I'll… I'll tell them. As soon as I get the chance."

"Good."

Jespar exhaled, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Everything around him felt heavy, sticky, revolting. The stars were the glowing eggs of spiders, ready to pop and spill their brood over the world beneath, the crickets chirping the sing-song of an insectoid god, the film of sweat on his skin some parasite's slimy excretion.

Kawu was right: *What a mess.*

What a godsdamned fucking mess.

He said, “We should go.”

***

When they returned to the study, Lysia had just finished dragging the assassins’ bodies out of the room, hoisting them next to the corpses of the servants, leaning with their backs against the wall beside the door. The male assassin’s mask had fallen off, revealing a nondescript, angled face, hair and beard closely shaved. With his eyes closed, nothing about it suggested the cruelty they’d shown. *Petrified,* Jespar thought. He’d heard the stories, about their rigorous training that started in childhood, where they were systematically traumatized to kill off their empathy, about that ceramic cheek that released a lethal poison if bit on hard enough to prevent them from talking if they were ever captured. He’d heard about their absurd rates that, according to rumor, was all that secretly kept the barren country of Melây from falling into poverty.

Inside the somberly lit room, Agaam sat on the edge of the desk, the short-haired servant on a chair in front of him. They talked in a hushed tone, the woman’s eyes fixed on Agaam’s. If she noticed Jespar and Kawu out in the hallway, she didn’t show it.

Lysia looked up. “There you are… we were getting worried.” She studied Kawu. “Are you all right?”

“Yuz. I got…” He broke off. “Scared.”

Lysia flicked him an empty smile—the first one she’d given him, Jespar realized. “Only a fool wouldn’t have.” To Jespar, she said, “Agaam managed to calm the woman with some kind of hypnosis, and I think she’s willing to talk. We were just waiting for you to come back. Ready?”

I better be. My fucking life depends on it.

“Yeah.”

The woman's eyes darted up when they approached, then widened with fear, every muscle stiffened like an animal poised for flight. Grey showed at her temples, her skin marked by lines that clustered around the eyes, the witnesses of a face that laughed a lot. The blood on the track marks of the assassin's claws had congealed.

Jespar halted.

You know her.

“You okay?” Lysia asked.

You know her.

Or do you?

Exhaustion. His mind was playing tricks on him.

"“… Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay.”

Agaam said something to the woman, speaking under his breath, and she relaxed and settled back into her chair.

“They’re friends,” Agaam said. “They saved you.”

The woman gave a weak nod that Jespar returned, attempting a reassuring smile. They pulled up chairs in a half-circle around the desk and sat. An interval of silence followed, milky blue moonlight illuminating the papers and books cluttering the mahogany desk. A toppled-over glass of ink had spilled over a stack of blank parchment.

Agaam leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. “Very well. Uula, wasn’t it?”

The woman nodded.

“I know this must be very difficult for you, but I need you to tell us what happened here. Let’s start with who you are. One of the servants, I take it?”

Uula muttered something.

“I didn't catch that, Uula.”

“Yuz,” she said. “I'm a servant.”

Even taking her agitation into account, there was something strange in the way she said it. Agaam creased his forehead. “What's your position?”

“N-nothing prestigious, just a chambermaid.”

“‘Prestigious,’” Agaam said. “Interesting choice of words for a chambermaid.”

“Look, it’s just—" She buried her face in her hands. “Oh, Saaras’Jodule, what a mess. What a godsforsaken, rotten mess!”

It was the image of her fingers clawing into her short, black hair that made the connection.

“Hold on,” Jespar said. “I know you.”

Agaam turned to face Jespar, a questioning look in his good eye.

“I… I don’t know what you're talking about,” Uula said, voice trembling.

“You were in the *sa’nuu* when I first met Enkshi, and you were in the crowd at the protest in the harbor, when they found the body of that woman.”

Tears glistened in Uula’s eyes. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“He’s right, Agaam," Lysia said. "I saw her too, at the pier when we left for Yuva. You were watching us.”

This time, Uula didn't reply.

“Well,” Agaam said, “this is a strange coincidence.” He leaned back and crossed his arms, his black-brown eye fixed on the short-haired woman. “Please explain.”

No answer.

Something in the way Agaam had intoned the words made Jespar wonder if he’d done the right thing telling the old servant about this. Then again, something told him he would have found out anyway.

Agaam sighed. “Ma’saa, we’re not your enemy. You can talk to us.”

Uula looked up, her eyes an odd mix of defiance and fear. “Else you’re going to *make* me talk, in that way you’re famous for, Xeelo Agaam?”

For an instant, Agaam seemed taken aback. “I don’t want to hurt you. Please, believe me—we’re not your enemy.” He paused then added, “On the contrary.”

Uula held his gaze some seconds longer. Then, she closed her eyes and drew a long breath. ”Fine. It’s not as if I have a choice anyway, do I?”

Agaam remained silent.

“Who are you?” Jespar said. “Why have you been following us, and why did you come here?”

Uula glanced at the dried-up puddles of blood on the ground. Briefly, her eyes cracked—then she straightened her back and placed her palm on her forehead, as if trying to soothe a headache. “Can we speak elsewhere?”

They went into the observatory, situated in the topmost tier of the ziggurat. It was a hexagonal room with a window on each wall and a vaulted ceiling held by tapered pillars.

A telescope stood on a narrow pedestal in the center, gazing into the night through a circular opening in the roof. A stone stairway circled around the pedestal and up onto the platform from which the telescope could be operated. Shelves, tables, and odd metalwork lined the walls. From astrology to alchemy, Oonai was a man of many interests.

Uula went to a desk at the far side of the room, so big it spanned the entire length of the wall, cluttered with books, scrolls, and strange-looking tools and instruments, some of which had an almost occult air to them. Uula half leaned, half sat on the edge, arms folded across her chest. Her gaze wandered to a telescope, and another tear went down her cheek, at odds with her rigid expression—it was as if the part of her mind responsible for all the terror she would have normally felt in light of the massacre she'd just witnessed was sealed off to protect her sanity. Jespar, Agaam, Lysia, and Kawu stood in front of her, and when a minute had passed and Uula was still staring at the telescope, Jespar crossed his arms and began drumming his fingers against his biceps.

Then Uula's eyes focused on Agaam. "My name isn't Uula. I'm Lania Ganêrys, and I work for Vel'Tuul."

"The Fifth Magnate?" Agaam asked.

"Mm-hm. I'm a… contractor, you could say. Not of the mercenary, sword-and-saber sort; my specialty is finding truths and making connections. I spent ten years working for the Coalition as a commissar."

"What's a 'commissar'?" Kawu asked.

Agaam said, "Coalition officials whose task it is to identify corruption and black-marketeering."

Ganêrys nodded. "Yuz. Some years back, I left the Coalition and started working independently. In short, Vel'Tuul hired me to investigate Oonai. To…" She glanced at Agaam, then looked at her feet. "To dig up dirt."

"Then that's why you were following us?" Lysia said. "And why you came here?"

"It's a little more complicated than that, but, yuz. I arrived here just yesterday, because I was following a… I don't even know how to call it. A trail, I suppose."

"And the guards just let you in?" Agaam asked.

“I told them I was here on an Edict,” she said, giving him a strange, hollow smile. “And, as the head servant knew I used to work for the Coalition, he decided to let me in.”

“What's an Edict?” Kawu asked. His arms were folded across his chest, his face riddled with exhaustion.

“It’s a decree issued by the Grandmaster of the Holy Order,” Agaam said. “Hence, the Light-Born themselves. It trumps any authority of the individual governments of the Civilized World.” He turned to Ganêrys and said, “Are you telling me that the head servant bought that story? That some woman dressed like a peasant just comes sauntering into one of Oonai’s manors sent by the gods themselves?”

“He did after I showed him the Edict, yuz, seal and all."

“A counterfeit,” Jespar said.

Ganêrys nodded.

“Let me clarify: You forged an Edict of the Light-Born,” Agaam said.

“I just told you.”

In a flat voice, Agaam said, “That’s a crime punishable by the most brutal methods of execution.”

“I'm aware of that.” Once more, she gave her dead-eyed smile, and, this time, something about it made Jespar’s skin crawl. “But, given the item of my investigation, I’d say it’s a justified measure. Frankly, though, I don’t think the head servant, Ajk…”

“Ejkaan.”

“… Right. That was his name. Well, I don’t think he believed my story one bit—you’re correct, it’s far too absurd. I think he let me in because a part of him wanted to talk to someone about this for a long time.” She leaned back, distractedly touched the claw marks on her face, then winced and withdrew her fingers. “So, we talked. We talked well into the morning hours, and, as it turned out, the little pieces of the puzzle that he and the other servants had gathered in the past year and that had given him this heavy, queasy feeling in the stomach, fit perfectly into mine. The next afternoon, he wanted to arrange for an escort to get me safely back to Uunil-Yâr… and then the assassins showed up."

Her voice took on a flat and emotionless tone, like a historian reciting an event from the distant past. “I was in my quarters on the second floor when it happened—I heard strange noises from outside and went into the lobby to see what was going on. Someone knocked at the door and a boy, the gardener’s apprentice, I think, opened it. He… he wasn’t thinking anything, he had no idea what these people had done out there, to the head servant, to the guards, to everyone, so he just raised his hand to greet them and asked them their business. But, before he even finished his sentence, that woman raised her claw and—” She broke off, her eyes glassy. “Well. You know the rest. I’ve seen my fair share of violence, but this…”

“I’m sorry,” Agaam said.

Ganêrys didn’t react.

“What happened next?” Agaam asked.

“They killed them,” she said. “Without batting an eyelash, one after the other. When they were done murdering everyone in the lobby, they came for the stairs, and that’s when I saw one of the other servants, an older man and a girl who couldn’t have been older than seventeen in the corridor across from me, waving me over. I ran to them and we fled in here to hide.” She made a joyless sound, half chuckle, half moan, that made the hair at the back of Jespar’s neck stand up. “Saaras’Jodule, we hid behind a desk. Can you believe it? We were like children playing hide and seek, hiding behind a piece of furniture as if that would change anything. The girl cried and I comforted her, telling her everything was going to be all right, though I knew it wouldn’t. Five minutes later, those monsters came in and killed the man and the girl like they were swatting flies.”

Jespar felt himself holding his breath. Lysia’s eyes were fixed on the floor as if she were studying the ornaments on the tiles.

Adjusting his eyepatch, Agaam said, “I’m sorry.”

“Mm.”

“Am I right to assume you know the reasons behind this attack?”

“Of course I do. They wanted to destroy the evidence and kill all the supposed witnesses, no matter if they knew something, or could know something in theory. The

only reason I'm still alive is because they suspected I've documented my investigation somewhere, and they needed to know where."

"Evidence? Evidence of what?"

Ganêrys turned to look out the window, where stars poked through scattered clouds and the moon cast salt-colored light over the vast jungle. "I had no idea what I was getting into, you know? All Vel'Tuul wanted was some compromising material on Oonai because he fears Oonai is trying to remove him from the council…" She made a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh. "Which he is, just not the way Vel'Tuul thinks." Her jaw showed under her skin, her hands trembled. "I should have let the Coalition in on this weeks ago, not tried to play hero. If I hadn't acted like a coinless fool, they would have never gotten wind of my investigation and sent those assassins after me… and decided to slaughter the entire staff in the process." She wiped a tear off her cheek with the back of her hand. "Either way, you want the story, don't you? Well, here it is: Oonai has been holding secret meetings up here all through last and this year. With Vel'Nyx."

There was a pause before Agaam answered. "Eîde Vel'Nyx?"

"The Third Magnate, yuz," Ganêrys said. "She and Oonai were working on a scheme to overthrow the Blue Island Coalition. They called it the 'Overgrowth Plan.'"

Interlude

Fifty-Seven Days Before

BY THE TIME THE MAN REACHES THE PLACE, the setting sun tinges the jungle a delirious crimson. A slim, blocky pyramid rises by the roadside, three stacked stone squares, tapering toward the top. The walls are ocher, probably turned so by decades of wind and sun and rain. How different it used to look when Mâmah first took him as a boy. Majestic, magical, sacred.

Or did it?

Perhaps it just seems so because most of the Boy's life back then took place in a cramped fisherman's hut, and not a palace to rival the gods'.

Walking up the steps to the temple's gate, the Man recalls how the High Priestess of Morala asked him for money last Drought. The people were falling from faith, she argued; too few were attending the masses. With a donation, she could hire more priests to spread the word and restore the temples to their former glory. The Man, to whom the notion of hiring priests to "spread the word" the way a fuck-shag innkeeper would send out girls to bring in new customers struck as funny, merely smiled.

"Tell me, High Priestess, aren't the gods not the only truth there is? The one, true religion?"

"Of course!"

"The way the sky is blue and palm trees green?"

"What are you trying to say, Ma'sao?"

"Merely that I believe that the 'one and only truth' doesn't need ambassadors to convince people it's true, just as the sky doesn't need one to evangelize its blueness."

"… You're ridiculing me."

"I'm not," the Man said. "But it appears my faith in the Light-Born's divinity is stronger than yours. If something is true, as the gods are, it doesn't need our mundane help to convince people it is."

"Ma'sao, I—"

"You may go."

Now, the Man is here—in the *raawa* of his childhood. In front of the weathered iron gate, he pauses. The fog gathers in his brain, clouding his thoughts.

What are you doing here?

He is acting like a fool. They spent one year devising the plan, one year of carefully shifting the currents. And, now, just before they would unleash the flood they wanted, he is going mad. It is ludicrous, it is careless. Not only did *she* become aware of his odd behavior, his wife and the Coalition had too, inviting the kind of attention he should avoid at all costs considering what he had done and was about to do.

Or had been about to?

With an angry breath, the Man opens the gate and steps inside.

Cool air surrounds him.

The temple is one open space, the ceiling following the three segments of the ziggurat architecture. Rows of pillars line the bottom step, growing from a floor of faded marble tiles. A square stone pool rises in the center, from which a warm glow fills the otherwise dark interior.

The Man is alone.

He crosses the room slowly, the gate crashing shut behind him.

As a boy, he enjoyed the masses. Not the praying part, not the rituals he already found silly back then, but the singing and the stories. *Oh, yuz, the stories.* His favorites were those of Morala herself, a farmer's daughter turned merchant who left her parent's modest rice field to make her fortune in the city. Nothing had stopped her, not her mother who thought she should marry and bear her husband four children, not a disease that almost killed her and left her barren, not the countless competitors who had laughed at that foolish rice scooper who thought she could best fate. From farmgirl to goddess—here

was a Big Dreamer for you. As the Man grew older, however, he began to develop a dislike for religion that quickly grew into contempt, and part of him still feels this contempt today.

Why?

Because the people just don't get it.

They don't get that the Canon of Apotheosis isn't about lighting candles at shrines; isn't about repeating the priests' sermons like a ventriloquist's puppet with dumb and blissful faces; isn't about praying for good fortune, health, or divine intervention in a one-sided love-affair. The Canon is about *accepting* responsibility, about realizing that every god was once Human, Starling, or Aeterna, and that there was no limit to what a strong will could achieve. At one point, the Man's resentment toward mindless believers was so strong that he refused to hire religious people at all, until his wife's stalwart piety had softened his stance a little. Let them light their flower wreaths if it made their miserable lives any better.

He couldn't care less.

The Man crosses to the pool, the heels of his hard-soled boots clicking on the scratched marble tiles. Approaching the basin, it becomes clear that it's not the water that glows but the countless candles in ceramic bowls floating on the surface like iridescent waterlilies. About a dozen rows of prayer banks face the basin, arranged in half circles. There is no dais or lectern, following the Kiléan custom: Instead of lecturing the templegoers from afar, the priest or priestess would circle the pool while giving their sermon, gesticulating spiritedly and interacting with the worshipers, the air thick with the smells of the ceremonial herbs, burnt oleander and sugarmint.

A strand of hair has come loose from the Man's topknot, falling down his high forehead. He tucks it back under his hood and readjusts the scarf covering his face. Then, he sits on a bank in the first row, facing the far end of the building. A relief spans the entire length of the temple, depicting some scene of the Apotheosis the Man can't remember. Another gods' house custom: One always sits with its back facing the door

because there's nothing to fear in an abode protected by the hand of the Light-Born. As far as horseshit traditions are concerned, this one is a close contender for the top rank.

Fool.

The Man rubs his temples using both thumbs, as if to clear his thoughts.

What are you doing here?

"Oh," a voice sounds from behind him.

The Man glances over his shoulder. A priest stands in the entrance, one hand on the door, the hazy sunset drawing a dreamlike outline. He's clad in yellow, sleeveless robes and at least a dozen prayer rings adorn each of his upper arms, their copper seeming to glow in the warm dark. Shadows obscure the priest's face, but judging by his stiff posture and the way his head is locked in the Man's direction, he's probably trying to determine whether the figure on the prayer bank is a threat.

What would a have-not do?

"Ma'sao?" the priest says. He speaks in a soft baritone, edged by tension.

Right.

The Man rises and bows deeply.

"May you prosper, Father. Please forgive the intrusion."

Both the gesture and the words feel strange, as if the Man speaks in a tongue forgotten, but they seem to do the trick. The priest relaxes and lets go of the door. It falls shut behind him. "There's nothing to forgive, Son."

Son, the Man thinks, feeling both amusement and anger. *He calls me "Son."*

The priest approaches, allowing the Man to get a better look at him. He is all angles and bones, so skinny that his prayer rings clink against each other when he walks. His oiled-back hair is balding, hinting at pigskin ancestry, and his face is clean-shaven except for a tuft of stubble below his right jowl. Something about that unshaven patch irks the Man.

"I merely did not expect a visitor today," the priest says. Stopping a few steps from the Man, confusion flickers in his eyes. He nods at the scarf covering the bottom half of the Man's face. "Please unveil yourself, Son. The gods are watching."

He calls me Son and he gives me orders.

The Man's irritation must have shown, because the priest takes a step back. Forcing a smile, the Man says, "With your permission, I'd rather not, Father."

"Why? It's the custom."

The Man lowers his eyes in what he hopes looks like a gesture of shame. "I'm… I'm disfigured."

"Oh," the priest says, the tension gone. "I understand." His empathy seems genuine. Taking a step closer, the priest puts a hand on the Man's shoulder. He smells of soap and roses. "But, trust me, there's no reason to be ashamed. Before the gods, we are all the same."

The Man stifles a laugh.

No, he wants to say. *No, we are not. To the gods, your petty little life is worth less than that of an ant.*

I was no different.

Shifting his weight from one leg to the other, he says, "I should go." He shakes the priest's hand off his shoulder and hurries past him to the door.

Halfway there, the priest calls out. "Wait!"

He catches up to the Man, prayer rings clinking. "Forgive me, Son, I didn't mean to upset you. You may remain shrouded if you wish."

How magnanimous of you.

The Man feigns hesitation.

"The gods understand," the priest adds.

"… I see. Thank you, Father. Thank you."

With an encouraging smile, the priest leads the Man back to the prayer banks. They sit in silence for a breath or two, the pool's light soft on the clergyman's face. Somehow, the Man's eyes keep flicking back to that badly shaved spot.

At last, the priest gives him a smile. "Well, then, Son, tell me: Why are you here? How may I help you?"

The Man glances at the mural at the far side of the room. For a moment, it feels as though the stone eyes of the seven figures are watching him. His fingers dig into the fabric of his robes. Then he draws a deep breath and straightens his back.

"I'm lost," he says, "and I need guidance."

He tells the priest everything.

The Man speaks slowly at first, but, soon, the words pour from his mouth. Though he alters his story to conceal his identity, its essence remains the same, and he is surprised at the power with which the fog hits him this time, stronger than ever before. When he is done, his mouth feels sour and his eyeballs burn, and a part of him just wants to go away, away from this stranger, away from this world, to lock himself in some dark, dead chamber where there's nothing and no one.

Why does he feel this way?

Why does he feel so fucking empty?

The Man had never considered himself a bad person. What are good and evil but simpleminded concepts for a complex truth anyway? There is choice, and there is consequence; there is cause, and there is effect.

Yuz, to a stranger, some of the decisions he has made throughout his life might seem heartless. What this stranger doesn't understand is that he hadn't made them out of malice but necessity. If life had shown him anything, it was that the world is an arena and you're the gladiator fighting the lions, and the stronger you fight, the more lions come at you. Most people lack the courage, the tenacity; they curl up on the ground and beg the beast to spare them, and that's why they're at the bottom and others are at the top.

The poverty the Man had been born into was only the first of many hurdles to overcome—the harder he'd fought, the farther he'd come, the more lions had arrived, betrayers disguising themselves as friends, assassination attempts on him and his family, fires burning down his warehouses, floods sinking his ships. The fight never ended, and, unless you stood smarter, stronger, more tenacious than the rest, you'd lose it all in an instant of weakness.

All the Man had done, all the things the strangers might consider "bad," he'd done to keep the prize, to survive, never to harm anyone. Life gave no respite.

A memory stirs at the bottom of his mind, and, for a breath, the fog becomes unbearable. He clenches his teeth, forces it down with all the willpower he can muster.

Beside him, the priest sits in silence, his hands folded in his lap. *Speak up, you kazuum,* the Man thinks, but he knows better than to say it. He's not here as himself. He's here as a have-not.

When the priest looks up at last, the candlelight reflects in his mud-colored eyes.

"What you did is terrible."

Heat shoots into the Man's temples. "I was only trying to—"

"What you were trying to do doesn't matter, the result does. You're partly to blame for what happened, and you know it as well as I do." He studies the Man's shrouded face, and, for some reason, the Man finds himself averting his eyes, as if that armadillo-faced clown had any authority over him.

Absurdly, the Man's lips tremble and tears well up in his eyes. "I just—" He buries his face in his hands. "Gods, I want to stop feeling this way. I just… I can't."

The priest says nothing. He just watches him cry. The Man hates himself while he does it, but he can't stop; the tears just keep coming.

"Then make amends," the priest says.

"… Amends?"

"It means to make up for what you've—"

"I know what it means," the Man says. His anger subdues some of the pain. "I just don't understand what I should make amends for. I told you, I did what I had to do to protect myself.

The priest holds the Man's gaze, and, somehow, he once again succeeds in making the Man lower his—four moons ago, this would have been unthinkable.

"Let me say it again: What you did is terrible. People died because you failed to consider anyone else but yourself."

And you don't even know the half of it, he thinks.

"You know nothing." The words sound feeble, almost childish.

The priest says, "I know a good man who has sinned when I see him."

Good man.

For some reason, it's those two words from the mouth of a village priest that break down the walls.

It's your fault.

Of course it is.

What he feels is plain old-fashioned guilt, and he feels it because the priest is right. Now that the denials, the rationalizations, the self-justifications are gone, he is baffled at his own delusion, at the lengths his mind went to warp the truth so he could cling to his illusion of righteousness.

Your fault.

He hadn't done this to protect himself, he hadn't done it to survive another round in the arena—he'd done it because his world revolved around one person, and that person was him.

He makes a sound that's half moan, half chuckle. The fog swells, but this time it carries a swarm of thoughts that sting into his brain like hornets, logical conclusions to the priest's words. He wants to scream, but, then, somehow, he manages to clear his mind, to sweep away the fog like an ocean gust.

This isn't him.

His strength has always been his refusal to surrender, his refusal to drop to the ground and wallow in self-pity the way his begetter did. Giving up is something the have-nots do, the naysayers, the weaklings. He made mistakes, fine, he'd lost touch with reality.

So what?

He'd fix it. He would make up for what he did, he'd stop the plan, repair whatever damage he still could. He'd become a better man, and then the guilt will stop, the fog cease. Choice and consequence.

"Perhaps you're right, Father," he says. "I did wrong."

"You did, Son. You—"

"So I'll make amends. I'll make amends, and I'll fix this."

The priest studies him silently. "You don't understand. Some things cannot be mended."

Now that his new resolve has driven away the fog, the Man feels an acid anger rising in his throat. "What are you saying?"

"I'm telling you that you cannot simply repair the damage you've done the way you'd fix a broken roof. Judging by what you've told me, it's irreparable." He eyes the Man then shakes his head. "And, while I may be mistaken, I can't help but feel as though you're making this about yourself rather than the people who suffered under your actions. Again."

The Man says nothing, holds the clergyman's gaze.

"What you're seeking is absolution, a way to wash away your guilt," the priest says. "But that doesn't exist. As I said, nothing can remove that mark on your soul, you're going to bear it for the rest of your life, to remind you of your wrongdoing. The best you can hope for is forgiveness."

The Man scoffs. "From whom? The gods?"

"The gods and yourself."

"And what good is this 'forgiveness' if it neither undoes my mistake nor fixes anything?"

"Forgiveness," the priest says, his armadillo eyes narrowed, "is about preventing that mark on your soul from festering. Why do you think you're feeling this way? Because you've been ignoring the weight of your sin for so long. To find forgiveness by making amends is the only way to prevent your pain from getting worse… not to mention that it's a way to honor all those who suffered under your actions. Which should be your priority to begin with."

Preventing the mark from festering?

The Man stifles a laugh. If his newly found revelation is right, if what he had done is indeed his fault, then this mark is just one of thousands, and none of these he had 'atoned' or been granted 'forgiveness' for. And yet, as much as he wants to dismiss the

priest's words as superstitious nonsense, he feels there's a truth in them—because his pain, this crushing, godsforsaken pain he's feeling, is real. If the marks of sins fester, and the Man has sinned countless times, what does his soul look like right now?

An ulcerous growth.

A tumor.

The fog grows denser and denser, forming a clamp around his throat that cuts off his breath. He glances at the priest, and, somehow, it's that badly shaved spot on his jaw that lights the fuse.

No.

The weakling priest is wrong, just like his begetter was wrong. He *can* fix this, he *can* make up for what he did, he *can* be *absolved,* and, once he has been, the fog will be gone, and he will be his old self again.

Only better.

The Man's fingers dig into the cold wooden bench.

"Fuck your forgiveness."

The priest freezes. "Son?"

"You heard me. How dare you tell me I'm beyond redemption?"

"I didn't—"

"Shut your fucking mouth!" He lifts a trembling finger. "Gods, you worthless insect. Do you have any idea who I am? Do you have *any* idea what I could do to you if I wanted?"

Before the priest has a chance to reply, the Man leans forward, his face level with the priest's. "One word from me and this place will be razed to the ground. One word and your family will be dead in a cell with the rats gnawing the flesh from their bones. One word and your corpse will be dangling from the highest tower in the city."

Eyes widened, the priest stares at the Man, his armadillo face a mask. Up close, the smell of his sour breath mingles with his rosy perfume.

"Yuz," the Man says, "yuz, I did things I regret. I did them to survive, I did them because this world is an arena where the strong survive and the weak get eaten. But

you're right, I made mistakes, I took it too far. But how dare you tell me I'm beyond redemption? Keep your godsdamned forgiveness!"

"Ma'sao, I—"

"I'll fix this… just watch me. I'll make up for what I did, I'll clear my name, I'll make amends worthy of a god. For every coin of blood money I've made, I'll save a child; for every house someone lost because of me, I'll build him one twice as big; for every soul that suffered under my actions, I'll save two." Seeing the fear in the priest's eyes, the Man skins his teeth. "And, by the time I'm done, people will pray to me rather than to your useless Light-Born because, unlike them, I'll listen."

Silence enfolds them, the priest's breath fast and shallow, the Man's eyes hot coals.

Guidance?

Did he really seek this insect for guidance?

You're pathetic.

"I can fix this. Mark my words, you coinless fool. I can clear my name."

For an instant, they just sit there in the gloom of the chapel like two figures in a sacral painting. Then, the Man stands and leaves. Though his calves burn and his pulse hammers in his wrists, he walks slowly, his back upright.

Gods don't run.

Chapter 15

Inferno

Had Ganêrys just told them that the sun would fall from the sky tomorrow, the looks they gave her wouldn't have differed.

Agaam narrowed his eyes. "They wanted to do what?"

"You heard me, Xeelo Agaam. I wasn't certain until I talked to the servants, but their testimonies were the missing pieces." Ganêrys turned around and began to mechanically rearrange the instruments on the table. "As you probably know, Oonai spent a lot of time here this and last year. At first, I thought it was because of an affair he had with a girl up here last Rain."

"He had many affairs," Agaam said.

"Yuz, but this one was different, at least if you believe the other servants. Their affair lasted for six weeks, and, for a while even, Ejkaan thought Oonai was serious about it. Either way, this isn't the point, as I found out while investigating Oonai for the past four moons. There was another reason he came up here so often, one neither his wife, nor his counsellor knew about."

"He met with Vel'Nyx," Lysia said.

Ganêrys nodded. "According to Head Servant Ejkaan, the meetings started around the second month of Rain last year, and my investigations verify this. The first time she stayed for three days."

She took an instrument from the table, a brass sphere enveloped by two perpendicular rings, and rolled it from one hand into the other.

"Of course, the servants weren't thinking much back them," she continued. "Oonai always had guests during his stays here, real guests he did business with or friends, I mean, not his flings. They realized Vel'Nyx was different when she came back for

another three days a week later, then again around the fourth month of Rain. Whenever Oonai was here, basically, Vel'Nyx showed up at least once a week, always by myrad, with an escort that was strangely small for someone of her status. As if she didn't want to draw attention."

"What were they doing here?" Jespar asked.

Ganêrys tossed the sphere from one hand into the other. "Officially, business. They spent most of the time talking in Oonai's office or while walking through the hedge maze. What about, Ejkaan didn't know. Of course, it also wasn't their place to ask. Their contracts bind them to absolute 'deafness and muteness' where Oonai or his guests are concerned, and even the slightest breach of those rules results in severe repercussions for them and their families. Typical Coalition conditions, in other words. So they just shut their mouths and eyes and ears and went about their days."

"And then?" Lysia said.

Ganêrys put the sphere back into its holding device. "Then one of the gardeners overheard disquieting bits of conversations as she was tending to the hedges. Just fragments of conversation, really, but enough that it weighed on her so much she told Ejkaan about it, who felt similarly. So, he began to eavesdrop."

"… What did he find?"

"Just bits and pieces," Ganêrys said. "Oonai and Vel'Nyx were very careful, even in a safe place like the manor. Still, what he told me fit my theory so well that, last night, I almost desperately looked for flaws. The assassins were the last wakeup call I needed. Someone is hiding a secret, and that secret is so rotten they're willing to butcher twenty-five innocents for it."

Like a bloated corpse rising to the surface by turbulent waters, Jespar remembered the bloodbath in the floors below, and, judging by the tears that formed in Ganêrys's eyes, she did too.

"So?" Agaam asked. "What did you find out?"

Ganêrys exhaled. "Actually, I think I need a drink first. Anyone offering?"

Reluctantly, Jespar passed her his water flask, which he'd filled with rice wine when they'd left the ziggurat. Ganêrys took it, uncorked it, and took a deep draught. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand then drank again, rivulets of the clear white liquor trickling down the corners of her mouth.

Jespar's right temple throbbed and his guts grew heavy. At first, he panicked, thinking it was the dream-eater, then he realized it was something simpler: Fear.

Oonai, the Scythe, the parasite: they were all connected, an intricate web of lies, schemes, and unknown truths that had woven its trap not merely around Oonai and the Kiléan archipelago, but also around Jespar by tying his fate to that of the magnate. What this woman would say next might be the knife to slash through the web—or the spider entering its nest.

Ganêrys lowered the flask. "Oonai and Vel'Nyx believe the Coalition stands in the way of progress. I still don't understand their exact motivations, but from what I pieced together, they seem to believe it has become inefficient. To quote what that servant girl overheard in the hedge maze, it has 'degenerated into a bunch of fat, corrupt old money aristocrats who owe their rank to their heritage rather than their own deeds, toying around in a suffocating pool of regulations, laws, and political bullshit that prevents real progress.' Conclaves that drag on for moons, convoluted ratification procedures, vetoes from the 'weakling magnates' like Vel'Tuul, who are afraid change will endanger their already crumbling position." She drank again, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "The Coalition has become choked with 'overgrowth' that is keeping Kilé from becoming the dominating power in the Civilized World it deserves to be."

Outside, the insects rose to a crescendo. Sweat stung in Jespar's neck and armpits, the leather of his harness sticky and heavy on his skin.

Kawu found his words first. "… I don't understand. If Ma'sao Oonai wanted to 'make the Coalition more efficient,' he could have just done so, couldn't he? He's the First Magnate, after all."

"That doesn't mean he can do whatever he wants." Agaam leaned against the railing of the staircase circling up to the telescope, his features shrouded by shadow. "The

constitution of the Coalition has several mechanisms to prevent the First Magnate from becoming a monarch. He may be the most powerful of the magnates, but he still needs three of the other magnates or the majority of the Coalition members to support each of his decisions. The whole idea of the Coalition is to be an entity rather than a bunch of individuals, that's what makes it so stable."

"Exactly," Ganêrys said. "Only that Oonai and Vel'Nyx seem to have a different view on the matter. Which is where the Overgrowth Plan comes into play. They want to burn it all. All the weeds, all the vines, all the parasitic growth."

In the blue light, Lysia's face was a pallid mask. Strands of hair hung in her face, clumped, probably caked with dried blood. "Meaning?"

"Meaning," Ganêrys said, "that they plan to remove about half of the Coalition members and the five other magnates, reshape the Coalition, and become the only two rulers of Kilé."

When Jespar spoke, his throat felt parched, as if he'd forgotten to swallow. "Are we talking about murder?"

Ganêrys looked at him. Her eyes had the same color as her traveler's garb: gray, like rain-soaked ash. "Mass murder."

Lysia said, "You're joking."

"I wish I was." Ganêrys took another swig of wine, color flushing into her bloodless cheeks. The flask had to be nearing its end. "I told you, I've been trying to convince myself of the same thing… but it all just fits too well. Oonai's secret meetings, Vel'Nyx's advisors, side trips to the black market, Oonai's new legislation, including the Golden Soil Decree… the only thing I still can't make sense of is his erratic behavior in the past couple of months, but I'm sure there's an explanation for it too. Oonai and Vel'Nyx are planning a coup."

Agaam scoffed. "That's absurd. Whatever you investigated, you must have drawn the wrong conclusions."

Ganêrys's eyes narrowed. "For the thousandth time, I wish I was. But, considering that there are two dozen corpses right below our feet, I almost got murdered, and everything

suggests the plan is already in full motion, I'd say the time for further investigation is over."

Jespar blinked. "It's… in motion?"

"Yuz. The Golden Soil Decree, the suicides, the Scythe… it's all part of it." Ganêrys nodded at the window, beyond which Mount Uunil rose in the far distance, a green giant speckled by pinpricks of light. "Everything that's been happening this year has been carefully orchestrated. The Overgrowth Plan started six moons ago."

"… Explain," Agaam said.

Ganêrys turned to face him, an almost defiant look in her eyes. She emptied the flask in one long draw and tossed it back to Jespar. There was a slight sway in her movements.

"If you want to murder three-hundred Coalition officials and five magnates," she said, "you can't just hire contract killers or use the Blue Guard to murder them. Even if Oonai and Vel'Nyx would have found a way to make such a grand-scale assassination work, there's no chance they'd still have the support of the people after this… not to mention the Light-Born, who would probably just send a battalion of keepers over to Kilé and dethrone Oonai and Vel'Nyx faster than they can say 'Saaras'Jodule." She sunk back down on the edge of the table, a drunken look coming into her face. "No… they needed someone else to do the burning for them. Someone who seems so unrelated to the Coalition that the mere thought of connecting them to Oonai or Vel'Nyx would seem ludicrous."

"The Scythe…" Kawu said quietly.

"Well done."

"Wait a minute," Lysia said. "You're saying that Oonai *created* the Scythe? A terrorist group that wants a rule of the working class?"

"Actually, Vel'Nyx came up with that idea, but, yuz, that's what I'm saying."

Things fell into place.

"They want the Scythe to start a riot," Jespar said, "don't they?"

Ganêrys nodded.

"Only it's not a *real* riot," Jespar said, "but a coordinated assassination attempt. The Scythe is going to use the chaos as a cover to systematically murder the 'overgrowth.'"

"Close. The Scythe is going to start a riot, throw weapons at the mob, rile it up, then let it march up Fortune Road and let their fury do its work."

Kawu paled. "That would be a bloodbath."

"Count on it."

"The ziggurats are fortresses," Jespar said. "How is a mob, even a big one, going to get through their walls to kill the magnates?"

Ganêrys gave him a wan smile. "I'm sure that can be taken care of. First of all, yuz, the ziggurats are well-defended, but they aren't designed to withstand a siege; that's what Uunil-Yâr's walls are for. Maybe the Scythe brings some battering rams along or has inside men in the ziggurat staff—the possibilities are endless if no one suspects an attack and the means are there, and Oonai and Vel'Nyx's treasuries made sure of the latter."

Lysia said, "But how on Vyn are they going to make sure the riot only hits the right people?"

"That's the one part I'm unsure about. I don't know. My guess would be that they're either going to receive warnings before the riot happens or be led out of town on some pretext."

"The conference on Xuuro," Agaam said at once. "There's a conference taking place on Xuuro right now, about some of the economic struggles on the island. Only selected members of the Coalition were invited."

Eyes locked with Lysia, Ganêrys nodded at Agaam. "There you have your answer, ma'saa."

"Stars fucking burn me," Lysia said. "That's insane."

Ganêrys smiled sourly. "But equally brilliant—if you leave morals aside. Suck the forest dry, repeatedly strike flint against stone, and wait for the spark to jump over. Then let the inferno do the work for you." Her eyes trailed off. "The Golden Soil Decree was all about parching the forest, about making sure the workers would be susceptible to the

Scythe's propaganda. Oonai and Vel'Nyx knew perfectly well what the decree meant for the 'have-nots.'"

"It was never about money," Kawu said.

"No, that's only what they told the Coalition in order to ratify it. It was all about depriving the coinless of what little they had left and stoke their hatred against the 'leeches' to get them to join the Scythe."

"So they can turn them into a bloodthirsty mob when the time comes," Jespar muttered. "What are the Twins then? Mercenaries?"

Ganêrys nodded. "As is the Scythe's hard core… Vel'Nyx dug them up in Uunil-Yâr's underground. The Twins were the perfect candidates for the job, two rogue elite soldiers of the Jade Carapace, with a reputation for cruelty and the charisma needed to convincingly act the part and ensure enough sign up for their cause."

Sawahe, Jespar thought. *Soul-dead.*

"That was the first stage of the plan," Ganêrys continued, a slur crawling into her voice. "For the next moons, all Oonai and Vel'Nyx had to do was to lean back and watch things as they unfold. The suicide epidemic following the Golden Soil Decree, the protests, the riots by the harbor workers in Teenos…"

"Teenos?" Lysia asked.

"An island south of Uunil," Agaam said. "The harbor workers protested against the decree, and things got out of hand."

"All anticipated." Jespar swallowed. His throat felt dry, a ball of sand. "I don't get it. They did all this, to… what, to become even more powerful?"

A tear rolled down Ganêrys's right cheek, her eyes staring off into the middle distance.

"Okay." Drawing a long breath, Lysia pushed her hair out of her face. "Okay, let's assume all this isn't just one big misunderstanding, but how on Vyn did Oonai and Vel'Nyx assure this thing doesn't go sideways? The part about instigating the populace sure as hell worked, but can they really rely on the Scythe to control the riot to that extent? I mean, let's assume it all works out how they planned it, and they rampage through the Jade District and the ziggurats and kill the 'overgrowth.' What then? A mob

of frenzied citizens isn't just going to stop at the doorstep of Vel'Nyx's and Oonai's ziggurats."

"That's the part I've been racking my brains over, but I think the head servant, Morala rest his soul, gave me an answer. There was another visitor in the ziggurat early this Drought: Major General Owe Duul. The commander of the Blue Guard."

"Are you suggesting he's involved too?"

"I don't know what I'm 'suggesting,'" Ganêrys said, "but I know it would make sense. Oonai owns most of the Blue Guard, but he needs someone on the inside if they plan a role in the coup as well. If I had to guess, I'd say that the plan is to lure the mob into a 'trap' somewhere on the way up to Fortune Road, to have the Blue Guard waiting for them somewhere. And, since the Scythe is all in on it, they could make sure the mob walks right into it."

Jespar said, "So, they quash the riot and it's over?"

"I told you, I don't know… I'm a commissar, not a psychic. But it would be the logical conclusion, wouldn't it? They use the Blue Guard to crush the mob, then Oonai and Vel'Nyx step into the picture and present themselves as the saviors of Kilé, as they masterminded the trap, saw the riot coming, or whatever other explanation they can come up with. It doesn't really matter because by then half the nobility and five of the magnates will be dead, and Kilé will lie in ruins.

"I suppose Oonai will just make one of those speeches he's so damn good at, where he proclaims his disappointment in the Kiléan people, how such honest, hard-working men and women could have possibly let themselves be manipulated by such vile propaganda. Then, he'd probably acknowledge that the decree was a mistake, as were many of the misguided policies in the past decades… which were, of course, all the fault of the 'overgrowth' and corrupt nobles who favor elitism over hard work and self-determination."

"… And he and Vel'Nyx are going to correct that by creating a new Coalition," Jespar said.

Ganêrys shrugged. “Make up your own story. They’re probably going to execute a few have-nots for good measure, smuggle the Twins and their mercenaries out of town, and send the rest back home. The details don’t matter. What matters is that they legitimize *their* coup by saving Kilé from the supposed coup of someone else.”

“Fucking hell,” Lysia said, “and here I thought I’d heard everything.”

Agaam shook his head. “You’re wrong. The nobility would never accept their rule. Never.”

Ganêrys snorted. “What’s left of the nobility, you mean. Yuz, Xeelo Agaam, they would, probably gratefully. Think about it: they *need* someone to take charge and restore order, and, for all they know, Oonai and Vel’Nyx were the ones who saved them in the first place. Sure, probably some of them will have their suspicions, but what could they do? Defy Oonai? With the five magnates dead, they’d lose the support of the only two people still able to protect them and whatever is left of their livelihood.”

Agaam gave Ganêrys a long, hard look. Finally, he muttered something into his beard. “Very well, let’s assume all this is true,” he said. “Then you believe Vel’Nyx sent those assassins after you to protect their secret?”

“Her or Oonai. Or both.”

“It wasn’t Oonai,” Agaam said.

“How do you—?”

The next moment, Agaam stood in front of her, his left arm cradling her neck, his right palm pressed against her forehead. Her eyes rolled back and she went limp at once.

Gingerly, Agaam eased her down onto the stone, cupping her neck with one hand. With the other he drew a scarf from his pouch, which he put under her head as a cushion.

Lysia rushed to him. “What on Vyn did you—”

“Just a sleeping spell. She’ll wake up whenever we want her to or on her own about twelve hours from now.”

“Why did you do this?” Kawu asked.

Agaam stood. “Because she doesn’t need to know more. Don’t worry, we’ll take care of her.”

Exhaling heavily, Lysia ran both hands through her hair. “All right. All right, whatever you say. So, you think Vel’Nyx sent those assassins?”

“I do. This woman is right—it all fits. Vel’Nyx must have found out about her investigation and sent those assassins after her to eliminate the hazard.”

Eliminate the hazard.

Who are you?

“And murder all those people just to be safe,” Lysia said.

Agaam nodded.

“Could she also have infected Oonai with the dream-eater?”

“Why would she?”

“Maybe she wanted the throne for herself,” Jespar said.

Agaam touched his beard. “I doubt it. If all this is true, Oonai is a vital element of the plan, and, while Vel’Nyx might be able to realize it without Oonai, she’d be taking a big risk doing so. She’s a pragmatist, and this doesn’t seem like her. That isn’t to say we can dismiss the possibility, but it’s unlikely.”

“Then who?” Lysia said. “Who planted that godsdamned bug?”

Her words were met with silence. Ganêrys mumbled something to their feet, her chest having settled into a steady rise and fall.

Fatigue flooded Jespar.

Tired.

He was so fucking tired.

How long had he been going? The last time he’d gotten truly restful sleep was on the ship back from Yuva three nights ago, before Oonai’s nightmare, before his infection, before the nightly visits of his father’s corpse and his close brush with death at the hands of two assassins. A sense of surrender joined the exhaustion, closed over him like rain clouds closing over the sun, and, for an instant, all he wanted was to let go and allow sleep to shut out the world.

He flexed his fingers, clenched his teeth.

You can’t.

He had to stay awake, had to keep going, had to fight.

He had to fix this.

And something clicked.

Gods.

"Unless… Oonai backed out of the plan."

They all looked at him.

"What?" Lysia asked.

"Oonai, he—" Jespar sunk down onto the edge of the table. "Oonai had second thoughts about the plan. Remember that vision I had when the dream-eater touched me? I *felt* something. Back then, I couldn't make sense of it, but, now, I think I can. Oonai felt regret. That's the strongest emotion the dream-eater feeds off of."

"Regret for… what? The plan?"

"Has to be. All I know is he regretted something deeply, and he was trying to 'fix it.' And just think about it, it fits! Ma'saa Oonai first noticed his odd behavior early this year, about four moons ago, right? That's when his 'melancholia' started, his 'curse,' as she put it. Enkshi said it couldn't have been about the effects of the Golden Soil Decree because the decree wasn't issued until a moon after the onset of Oonai's melancholia, remember?"

"… Yeah."

"Well, now we know that doesn't matter. Oonai had plenty of time to ponder the implications of the decree, because it was part of the plan all along. He had plenty of time to develop self-doubts and to realize how messed up that plan of his really was. And when it was finally set into motion and it was too late to turn back, he couldn't deny it any longer. Gods, he even called in a conclave and tried to convince the Coalition to revoke the decree, didn't he?"

"A couple of weeks before his coma started," Agaam said. "And everyone turned him down."

"There you have it—that was his attempt to stop it, to fix his wrongs, but he failed spectacularly because it was already too late by then. And, while he may have managed

to hide his self-doubts from Vel'Nyx until then, she knew something was wrong after his appearance at that conclave."

Under his breath, Kawu said, "She knew he was backing out."

"And, thus, put not only the plan, but herself at incredible risk," Jespar said. "So she infected him with the dream-eater."

Silence stretched out between them.

"If Oonai had become a liability to the plan," Agaam said, "then why didn't she just murder him? Why go through all the lengths of finding a dream-eater and infecting him with it?"

Jespar considered. "Because it would have caused massive political unrest, or at least sparked an investigation into his death and that kind of tumult might have been even more dangerous to the plan than Oonai's doubts. What she needed was his silence." Some of his strength returned, pushing back against exhaustion and defeat. "So she buys a dream-eater, has a dreamwalker imprint it on herself, and infects Oonai, plunging him into a coma and, thus, ensuring his silence. And neither his wife nor Enkshi can tell anyone because they know it would cause chaos. It's the perfect solution."

"But when did she infect him?" Lysia said. "Ma'saa Oonai and Enkshi said he didn't leave the ziggurat after the curse started, except…"

Jespar nodded. "Except for the conclave and those long walks he took on Mount Uunil weeks before the coma started. He must have met with Vel'Nyx on one of them, maybe trying to convince her to call off the plan."

"That's a big leap. If you have second thoughts about a conspiracy you're involved in, the last thing you do is meet with your co-conspirator at night and tell her that. Oonai knew that."

"The sane Oonai did," Jespar said. "But we're talking about the same man who went to a Coalition conclave unwashed and frantically shouted at the other magnates to withdraw the decree. You heard what his wife said, by that time he wasn't himself anymore—his melancholia and guilt had clouded his judgment."

Lysia held his gaze, lips in a frown. "In that case, we're fucked."

Jespar blinked. “What? Why?”

“Because Vel’Nyx isn’t on Kilé anymore. Remember what Enkshi said before we left?”

“She’s not…?”

“Ma’saa Varroy is right,” Agaam said. “Magnate Vel’Nyx sailed to Qyra last week, in the wake of the Scythe’s terror attacks. Or so she claimed.”

“She left because the plan is about to enter its final stage,” Lysia said. “And she had to get to safety.”

Jespar started to speak, broke off, started again. “Then… then we have to find her. If she infected Oonai, she’s also the only one who can order the dream-eater to withdraw.”

“If she went to Qyra and not some kind of hideout, she’s got to be far out on the Red Sea by now,” Lysia said. “Even if we could step on a ship this very moment we couldn’t confront her until she lands in Al-Rashim. That’s far too late.”

All strength drained from Jespar’s limbs. “… Gods.”

He looked to Kawu, as if to find reassurance. Kawu’s face was immovable as a mask, his eyelids twitching as if he were fighting back tears.

Resignation replaced the turmoil on Lysia’s face. She adjusted the pouches on her belt. “Well, then, that’s it. The only thing we can do now is inform the Coalition of that plan, have them incarcerate that corrupt General, and hope they can stop the riot before it’s too late.”

“No,” Jespar said.

Lysia’s eyes flicked up.

“We have to save Oonai,” he said. “We have to destroy the dream-eater.”

“Didn’t you listen? We can’t.”

“But we have to,” Jespar said. He’d tried to put emphasis behind his words, but failed. “Think about it, Lysia. If we find a way to wake Oonai, he can stop the Overgrowth Plan himself. He could… he could recall the Scythe and imprison General Duul. He could call it all off.”

"I'd rather place my money on the Coalition and the Blue Guard than an insane, narcissistic megalomaniac who we *believe* had a sudden change of heart. Also, that's completely beside the point: If Vel'Nyx planted the dream-eater, then we can't save him because she's either too far gone or hiding somewhere in the archipelago to wait for the riot to be over!" She made a frustrated noise. "Not to mention that I'm past caring for this maniac. I'm not going to risk my life for this, and neither should you. The Coalition will handle this, and, if they won't, well, then we've done all we can." She went over to a map mounted to one of the walls, showing constellations of stars. "I'm done here. This man doesn't deserve to be saved, change of heart or not."

"Please, Lysia," Jespar said quietly, "don't give up. Not now."

Lysia whirled around. "Why? What is it to you, Jespar Dal'Varek? 'People only care as far as their eyes can see,' isn't that how you put it? So why on Vyn would you of all people want to risk your life for a man like this?"

Jespar opened his mouth to speak, but the words stuck in his throat. He tried again, but all he managed was a stutter.

"I get it," Lysia said, her voice now softer, "you probably feel some kind of loyalty toward Ma'saa Oonai because of that whole 'Morala chose you' nonsense. But, please, I'm telling you: we've done all we can. We already almost died twice, and this isn't worth dying for."

Kawu said, "He already is."

Lysia looked at him. "… What are you talking about?"

"I think Jespar should answer that question."

A last bit of hesitation welled up—then Jespar closed his eyes. He told them.

Lysia leaned against the windowsill, silently looking out at the nocturnal panorama.

"Lysia?" Jespar asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm… I'm here."

"Are you okay?"

She turned her face, one half lit by the moon, the other dipped in soft shadows. "I'm just trying to figure out why you didn't tell me sooner."

"Kawu only told me last night," Jespar said. "And I… I don't know. I didn't want to burden you with it."

"… I see." She turned to Kawu. "And there's no other way to get rid of it? If the bug hasn't hatched yet, I could try my light magic to pop the egg. It's the standard method of dealing with parasites."

Kawu hugged his elbows. "We don't know when the dream-eater develops its toxin. It might work, but it might kill Jespar instead."

Lysia swallowed. "Okay, but there has to be something, right? You're a dreamwalker, so there has to be something you can do—couldn't you… I don't know, couldn't you enter his mind and kill it there?"

When Kawu merely averted his eyes, Lysia buried her head in her hands. "Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit!"

The intensity of her reaction surprised and moved Jespar in equal parts. He approached her and reached out, but she drew away. "In other words, if we don't cure Oonai, you die. Is that what you're telling me?"

"… Yes."

"And how much time do you have left? Before it hatches, I mean?"

"We don't know," Jespar said. "But the seizures have been getting worse, so probably no more than a couple days. At most." He was surprised at how calm he sounded. It was as if Lysia's upset nullified his own.

"That's not enough. Even if we mobilized the entire fleet of the Blue Guard now, we'd need days to catch up to Vel'Nyx, and that's assuming she actually *went* to Qyra and isn't hiding somewhere."

Agaam, who had listened to Jespar's confession without moving a muscle, spoke up. "We could use myrads to search the archipelago. They are twice as fast as a galleon."

"That's still two days at least, not counting the time we need to get back to the city from here."

Agaam had no reply.

"We… we have to try," Jespar said. "It's all we can do."

"It's pointless."

"I—"

"There might be another way," Kawu said.

All faces turned to him.

"To cure me?" Jespar asked.

"No, to find Vel'Nyx. We could enter her *tuewa* and confront her there."

"Enter her *tuewa?* Like we did with Oonai?"

"Yuz."

Lysia cocked her head. "Didn't you say the dreamers physical body needs to be nearby to perform that hypnosis?"

Meeting her hard stare, Kawu looked away and hugged his elbows tighter. "That's the most common way to do it, because it allows the dreamwalker to enter the In-Between near the target dreamer's *tuewa.* But, if we find something that belongs or has great meaning to her, I could try to use it as a sort of compass to navigate us through the In-Between instead. It could take weeks to find her, but as time doesn't exist down there, we're not losing any."

"And… and that works?" Jespar asked.

Kawu sighed. "I don't know, Jespar… I've never done it. But it seems to me like we're out of options, and I'm willing to take the risk."

Jespar's throat tightened as an odd sense of guilt settled in him. Kawu and Lysia—both were willing to put their lives on the line for him.

"… Thank you," he said. "To both of you. Thank you."

Though the exhaustion in his face remained, Kawu gave him a weak smile, while Lysia seemed lost in concentration.

"That still leaves the question of how we get our hands on a personal item of Vel'Nyx's. Do we break into her ziggurat?"

"That's impossible," Agaam said. "Even if she's gone, the place is heavily guarded, probably even more so considering she's expecting a riot." He paused. "There might be something in the Oonai Ziggurat that could help us, though."

"What?"

"The Magnate's Crown. It doesn't belong to Vel'Nyx, but it's been handed down to the First Magnate of the Coalition for centuries. Until Oonai joined the Coalition at thirty, everybody believed that Vel'Nyx would succeed the former First Magnate and take the Crown."

"And then Oonai got it?"

"It wasn't that simple, but, yuz, he worked his way to the top in less than ten years, and when the First Magnate passed away and the Coalition elected her successor, Vel'Nyx lost the vote by only ten voices."

Jespar frowned. "And yet she wants to join forces with him to establish a diarchy?"

Agaam adjusted his eyepatch. "Well, there's no feud between them. When Oonai trumped her, she accepted his victory and became one of his biggest supporters… it's a wise move if you think about it. There's nothing to be gained by antagonizing the most powerful man in the country, but plenty from being on good terms with him."

Lysia said, "And yet she didn't hesitate to assassinate Oonai when he became a liability."

"As I said, a pragmatist. Still, I'm certain the Magnate's Crown has lost none of its importance to her." He turned to Kawu. "What do you think, Ma'sao Nākhani? Could this work?"

After a long pause, Kawu said, "We have to try."

Chapter 16

Protector

THE SUN ROSE SLEEPILY through blue morning clouds, dipping the eastern ocean and the carpet of treetops a somnolent amber. Jespar kept his eyes on the road as he led his horse down the rise to Kaâra Manor, the sticky cold feeling of being watched pressing into his back. It was irrational, of course—he had the same feeling ever since they'd left the manor's gate without burying the corpses, the thought that, were he to turn around, he'd find the dead standing behind the windows, watching him depart with their dull, dead eyes, their slashed throats, snapped necks, and shattered skulls.

He shook off the thought.

"Are you all right?" Kawu asked from behind him.

Jespar glanced over his shoulder, where Kawu's tired eyes studied him with concern. He smiled. "No fever, if that's what you mean."

The corners of Kawu's mouth curled up slightly. "Good."

No fever, Jespar thought, *but a shitload of fear.*

They followed Agaam's lead as he steered his horse down the winding path and back into the dell, then into the jungle that would lead them back to the eastern coast. Ganêrys was still out cold, her body hanging over Agaam's stallion, secured with two ropes slung around her waist.

They reached the Crossroads Tavern in the early hours of the afternoon, the sky alternating between blazing heat, fat dark clouds, and showers—Rain had begun.

As if performing a routine chore, Agaam untethered Ganêrys and placed his hand on her forehead for a second time. Her eyes opened, fluttered, then shut again. He hoisted her up, and disappeared inside the tavern like a man taking a drunken friend back home.

"Will she be all right?" Kawu asked when Agaam reemerged without her.

"I promised the innkeeper another three hundred sêr next week if he sees to her well-being." He mounted his horse, straightened the reins, and went back on the broad, rain-soaked road.

Next week.

For the first time since Kawu had told him about his infection, the realization that Jespar might not be around to see it fully sunk in.

They rode as fast as their horses allowed, making it to the Mandibles and stopping only when a cat-and-dog downpour set in, making it too dangerous to pass the narrow land bridges that connected north to south. They hurried to a precipice formed by a natural stone formation, but, by the time they were under its shelter, they were soaked to the bone, tropical rain replacing the relentless film of sweat on their skin. To keep their horses from panicking, they tied them to one of the many spiky rocks that jutted out from the grass like skeletal fingers—a needless measure, as it turned out, as their steeds lay down and fell asleep almost at once.

Jespar felt no different, and, when Agaam managed to light a fire, he had to fight to keep his eyes open. They ate their fruit and rice in silence, the rain roaring around them, nature returning to the soil the moisture it had taken during the long Drought. There wasn't much conversation and Jespar was grateful for it. Ever since he'd disclosed his infection to Agaam and Lysia, there was something strange about the way they looked at him: pity, concern, and unease in equal parts. He couldn't blame them. Disease was unsettling, no matter how you normally felt toward the afflicted, and the fact that the disease in question was a parasite didn't help. It was as if the illness not only poisoned your body, but also that immaterial energy around you arcanists called *aura*. Only Kawu didn't treat him any differently, except for that solemn, alert look of concern he'd had ever since that night on the finger-shaped rock.

Dying. So that's what it felt like: rushes of panic alternating with a strange mix of looking away and acceptance.

Don't think, godsdammit.

Don't.

You can't change it.

After eating, Jespar laid out his rain-soaked bedroll near Kawu, and let him perform the third refocusing of the day. When Kawu withdrew his hands, his fingers shook. The circles under his eyes were deeper. "I'll wake you in roughly three and a half hours for the next one. Try to get whatever sleep you can."

As if his words had broken a dam, fatigue washed over Jespar. He nodded faintly then curled up on the dirty leather. His dreams were a hot blur of memories and fears, but, when Kawu woke him as promised, he felt better, not quite rested, but better. The rain had ceased. Under the splashing of the ocean and the sing-song of the morning animals, Kawu placed his splayed fingers on Jespar's forehead again. He shivered as the crystal cold rushed through him.

"Next time tomorrow morning," Kawu said.

Jespar took his palms and kissed his forehead. "Thank you."

The dark shrouded Kawu's face. "Just don't die."

***

It was just past noon when they reached the first spurs of Mount Uunil, and Agaam allowed for the first break of the day. The overnight downpour had turned the roads mushy, making it hard to advance, and even the five hours of morning sun hadn't entirely dried up the wet. They brought their horses to a halt at a small river about a quarter up Mount Uunil and let them drink. The ziggurats were already visible in the distance, white miniature pyramids just under the clouds. Kawu refocused Jespar then excused himself and disappeared in the nearby forest to "catch his breath." Jespar considered joining Lysia, who sat some steps away on the shoal, absentmindedly eating one of the yellow gooseberries—*kiwa*, as the Kiléans called them—but then he remembered that pity-worry-unease look she'd probably have on her face if they talked, and he went off to sit alone instead. Like the stream rushing past his feet, he allowed his thoughts to drift,

carefully maneuvering them around all those dark, sharp thoughts that hovered over his neck like a guillotine.

He thought of Lysia, that night on the ship, the way the nightflower smoke had risen between their faces when she'd kissed him.

He thought of Kawu.

Seven days.

Had it really been merely seven days since his ship had landed in Port Vaju, six since he'd met Counselor Enkshi in the sa'nuu on the great bazaar? A part of him, he realized, still hadn't processed last week's events, and it was probably that part that kept him from going mad. If a period in his life had ever qualified as a whirlwind, this was it. *Cyclone's more like it,* he thought, turning to Agaam, who stroked his horse's mane with a sinewy, muscular arm. Jespar had tried inquiring about the old servant's identity when they'd crossed the Mandibles, but Agaam had brushed him off with a noncommittal answer. He looked up.

"Do you need anything, ma'sao?"

Ma'sao.

Perfect manners, as always. As though Jespar hadn't witnessed him making two people stick their weapons up their own throats just a day ago.

"… No. Thank you."

Agaam nodded and turned his attention back to the horse. Jespar turned his back to the river.

They stayed a little longer then embarked on the last part of their journey. Clouds came up, stretching a monochrome blanket across the sky, but the heat didn't waver, turning the jungle into a hot cauldron. Come afternoon, they were back on the mountain path they'd descended when they'd set out to Kaâra Manor, a gravel trail lazily meandering up Mount Uunil. Up this high, the dense boscage of the rainforest had given way to a carpet of ankle-high shrubs and grass, the wind providing some welcome relief from the heat. Down toward the valley, the jungle stretched on endlessly except for clusters of villages

and the arranged rows of green and violet of banana and nightflower plantations. After a while of silent riding, Agaam let his horse fall back into step beside Jespar.

"I suppose I owe you an explanation." He spoke loud enough for Kawu and Lysia to hear as well.

Now you do?

"Yeah?" Lysia said behind them.

"In light of what happened, yuz. I think it'd be appropriate for us to be honest with each other."

They waited for him to go on.

"As you probably surmised yourselves, I'm not just Oonai's head servant. I served in the Blue Guard most of my life, as an officer in the Jade Carapace."

"The elite unit," Jespar said. "The ones the Twins served in."

"Correct… though they were well past my time there. I quit the Carapace eleven years ago, when Oonai was appointed First Magnate, to serve as his personal protector. As you can imagine, a man of his stature has many enemies, and it was my responsibility to see they didn't get the better of him." He glanced at Lysia. "I wasn't his leg-breaker or personal assassin, if that's what you are thinking. In fact, Oonai even opposed such tactics, hard as it may be to believe considering… recent events." Agaam's eyes drifted toward the endless jungle that stretched out beneath them. "He wasn't always a bad man."

Jespar scrunched up an eyebrow. "Past tense?"

Agaam gave him a weary smile. "You can say it, Dal'Varek: Jaaros Ismiraael Oonai is a rotten man. I've known it for several years now."

"And yet you still serve him," Lysia said.

"I do." Agaam smoothed the mane of his horse. A breeze picked up. "Until a year ago, I told myself that it's because I can limit the damage as long as I'm part of the 'inner circle.' If I were to step down from my position, someone else would take my place who'd never dare to step up and voice their concerns if Oonai was about to do something irresponsible."

"Damage control," Jespar said. "And? Did it work?"

"I told myself it did. I know it may not be evident, but both Counselor Enkshi and Oonai valued my opinion. But that's not the point. Recently, I've begun to wonder whether the reason I served Oonai so long despite his moral ambiguity wasn't far simpler… maybe. I dreaded retirement." He adjusted his eyepatch. "I didn't want to become insign—"

He buckled over, crying out.

For a flicker, Jespar didn't understand what was happening. Then he noticed the piece of wood stuck in Agaam's chest.

Oh shit.

A second arrow hit Agaam, piercing into his right thigh. The third missed and hit the hind leg of the horse instead. The animal made a sound that was both cry and whinny then bolted off down the slope, evading a fourth arrow that cut through the air not far from where the servant's head had been a second ago.

Numb from shock, Jespar watched Agaam and his horse tear down the steep slope, the servant's body rocking back and forth like a lifeless puppet as the mount's hooves skidded over the craggy soil.

"Ride!" Lysia screamed behind him.

Jespar snapped out of his stupor. He yanked his horse around in a half-circle, noticing three riders in black clothes standing on a rise to their right, two of them with their bows raised. He spurred his horse and shot off back down the slope. An arrow missed him by finger-lengths, another clattered off a rock.

Lysia and Kawu galloped down the path, heads pressed against their horses' necks. A third arrow cut through the air, hit the gravel. It went on for what must have been a minute, then they were back in the jungle, crashing down the path. They must have ridden a good mile before Lysia finally slowed down her horse up ahead, and Jespar at last dared to glance over his shoulder, half-expecting a horde of black-robed riders right at their heels, spears and scimitars drawn.

The road was deserted.

Jespar blinked to clear away the burning from the sweat that had gotten into his eyeballs and he looked around, just becoming aware of his environment as if a man awaking from a long dream.

They were on a crossroads, the jungle dense all around them. There was a waypost up ahead, three weathered signs pointing west, north, and south: Uunil-Yâr, Kaâra, Vaju.

"Are they gone?" Kawu asked, breath coming heavy.

"Seems like it," Jespar said. "And so is Agaam."

There was a brief pause. "Then we have to go look for him."

"We can't," Lysia said. "We'd have to scour the entire side of the mountain, and we don't have the time."

"But we can't just let him die!"

"I hate to say it, but, in all likelihood, he is already dead. He got hit, didn't he, Jespar?"

"Twice."

"There you have it. Even if he miraculously managed to stay on horseback that entire time, you bet he has lost consciousness and a barrelful of blood by now. If he didn't, you can be sure those riders will come looking for him." She turned to Jespar. "Did you see them?"

"Yeah… Scythe. That was an assassination attempt."

Lysia exhaled, rubbed her forehead with the heel of her palm. "Shit. What now?"

Jespar's head spun. Blood throbbed in his temples. His heart hammered in his chest. "I don't think there's much we can do except to go on. We need to get to the ziggurat as fast as possible and find the Magnate's Crown. Else…"

Lysia nodded. "I suppose the mountain path is off the table, so we need to go through the city."

"Y—"

The fever came without warning. It shot deep into his bones and his sight blurred, but this time it was more than just pain: For a flicker, he was on top of that ice lake again, the ground melting under his feet, the black, cold water pulling on him. The Corpse's head

floated up to the surface, this time on a disembodied torso, both hands outstretched as if preparing for an embrace.

Flicker.

Kawu's fingers were on his forehead, while Lysia grabbed him under his arms—he had half-fallen off his horse. The headache dissolved.

"Are you okay?" Kawu asked.

Jespar nodded feebly.

Lysia said, "It was the dream-eater, wasn't it?"

"…Yeah."

She turned to Kawu. "I don't get it. Didn't you just do that refocusing thing a couple of hours ago?"

"I did," Kawu said. He looked terribly pale, to the point of sickness. "It can't have been more than two hours."

"Does that mean…?"

"The intervals are getting shorter, yuz. I think the parasite is about to hatch."

Lysia's eyes narrowed. "Then we better ride fast."

She took her reins and turned her horse around. Kawu stayed, looking at Jespar with a cryptic expression. "We'll perform the next refocusing around sunset, just to be on the safe side."

"Mm-hm."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," Jespar said. "I am."

Hesitating, Kawu nodded. Then he turned his horse around and followed Lysia.

The truth was he was scared.

Fucking scared.

***

Jespar had felt something was amiss ever since the Scythes ambushed them on the mountain path. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. There was simply something in the

air, a sense of tension, a silence that permeated even the thick sounds of the jungle. The proof came in the shape of a roadblock. They had reached the farmlands between Port Vaju and Uunil-Yâr, where Jespar's journey had started in what now seemed an eternity ago. When he noticed a cluster of at least a dozen men farther down the road, standing in front of a makeshift wooden wall, he raised his hand. Lysia rode up beside him.

"What is it?" Lysia asked.

Jespar nodded at the barrier. "Up ahead."

Lysia squinted. "Huh. Look like farmers to me."

"Well-armed farmers."

"You think—"

"I think that this is a roadblock. I pray I'm wrong, but something tells me these guys belong to the Scythe."

*"*Why would they put up a roadblock?"

The answer arose in the back of Jespar's mind, but he didn't say it. "I don't know."

One of the peasants, holding his pitchfork like a halberd, had noticed them and was looking in their direction, shielding his eyes from the sun. As inconspicuously as he could, Jespar turned his horse around and they backtracked the path to the last crossing, where they discussed how to proceed. In the end, they settled for Kawu's suggestion, which was to follow the shoreline and enter the city through the first entrance they found unguarded. The detour cost them another hour, and with every bit the cloud-covered silhouette of the sun crept closer to the horizon, Jespar's unease grew. When they circled the southeastern corner of the island and Uunil-Yâr at last rose in the distance, tendrils of smoke rose from its roofs. Jespar and Lysia exchanged silent glances but pushed on.

Not even a mile farther, they saw the first fires. Uunil-Yâr was in flames.

The riot had begun.

Chapter 17

The Dream Is Rotten

The Gallowmen's flag hung lifeless under an overcast afternoon sky, the red and black man with the broken neck a distorted figure on the limp white cloth. The air was filled with smoke and the tang of burned timber and something else that might have reminded an unknowing observer of a pig roasting over a spit. Jespar knew it was something else.

So that's what it smells like.

The thought caused no emotion, felt dull and distant, like a voice muffled by thick walls. Everything felt this way since things had gone wrong. *When had it started?* He knew it couldn't have been long, not even half an hour. And yet here he stood, and everything had changed. Here he stood, in a world that no longer made sense anymore.

They were on the right side.

Yes, war was cruel. Yes, war was violent. No, there were no "good guys." But, sometimes, war was necessary. If a monster was about to eat your children, you didn't argue—you fought for your life. And this war, it had its monsters—they wore masks, they served a mad god, and they nailed the heretics to crosses and burned them alive, and the armies of the Middlerealm, under whom the Gallowmen fought, were all that stood between them and a grim future. Granted, the Gallowmen weren't saints—you didn't join a mercenary army to save virgins and liberate the oppressed—and wars weren't won with fanfares and glory but with blood and sweat and grime, and, no matter how well you meant, the innocent and impartial always got caught in the line of fire, one way or another. No, there were no saints in war, mercenary or soldier. But there was a right and a wrong side of history, and the Gallowmen—and Jespar—fought for the former.

Somewhere, someone screamed. Numbly, Jespar's eyes wandered to the origin of the sound, only to see the hem of a skirt and two kicking, soot-stained feet dragged into an alley. A man came running out of a house, fire roaring out of the small clay windows and from the thatched roof. He made five steps before he was cut down by an axe. Its wielder, a black-haired woman with a pockmarked face—*you know her, you talked to her last night at the campfire*—gave Jespar a nonchalant look, then sank to her haunches and searched the man's pockets. He was still alive, blood spouting from his half-severed neck.

For a moment, Jespar struggled with the irrational impulse to cross to the woman and talk to her, patiently explaining to her that what she was doing was wrong, that surely this was a misunderstanding, the way a father would talk to his child who'd stolen a toy and didn't understand she'd done something wrong.

Two men emerged from an alley across him, their sunbaked faces contrasting their white robes: civilians, the ones they'd come here to save. Under different circumstances, their expressions might have been even comical, the way they flickered between bewilderment, grief, and rage, and, before he knew it, a smile crested the corners of his mouth. The men noticed him.

"Son of a whore." The speaker had a black beard that went down to his chest. "Carrion-eating son of a *whore*!"

The next moment, that man and his friend were charging him, the ubiquitous fire reflecting in curved steel rods in their hands Jespar only a breath later realized were scimitars. *They want to kill you*, he thought, but, for some reason he didn't move, just stood there under the Gallowmen banner with a wide grin plastered across his face like some village idiot.

A crossbow bolt cut through the air, pierced the bearded man's throat in a spray of red, and cleanly went out the other side. He gripped his throat, gurgled, collapsed. The other man stared at him, then at Jespar, then spun around and ran. He made it a few steps into the alley he'd come from before a bolt hit him in the back, propelling him forward. He came down hard on the ground and lay still.

A man walked up beside Jespar, an arbalest in his right hand. Soot smeared his gaunt face. “What the fuck are you doin’, lad?”

“I’m…” Jespar broke off.

The mercenary gave him a pitiful glance, then gave an angry sigh. “They had it comin’ for ’em, lad—they hid them lunatics in their basements. You really think they would’ve spared us had that ambush they’d planned for us worked?”

Jespar said nothing.

“No, lad, they wouldn’t.” He shot a finger behind him, at the village entrance, where rows of giant crosses lined the road. “They’d have nailed us on them things there, have set fire to our clothes, and then laughed while their lunatic priests sing prayers to their fucked up god. They had this comin’ for ’em, lad, they had this fuckin’ comin’.”

But we stopped them, Jespar wanted to say. *We thwarted the ambush and we killed the lunatics until there were just the villagers left and the danger was gone and then something just* snapped *and someone just started killing and they went along.*

But, instead, he nodded weakly.

The mercenary’s sun-chipped lips moved as he said something else, a line of snot hanging from his right nostril and swinging left and right with the motions of his jaw. Jespar didn’t hear the words.

He walked past his comrade and left the village. By night, he was back in the camp, curled up on his mattress, asleep.

***

“Jespar?”

Sweat gathered in the pit of Jespar’s clavicle. His throat hurt from the smoke. Slowly, Jespar turned to the owner of the voice: Lysia.

“What’s going on with him?” she asked, now looking at Kawu. “The bug?”

“His mind is still clear,” Kawu said. “It’s something else.”

Lysia replied, but her words were lost in a blur.

"I'm… I'm okay."

She stopped talking, her eyes drawn together. "Could you repeat that?"

"I'm okay," Jespar said. "Really."

He loosened the grip on the reins of his horse, the white of his knuckles receding. Gradually, his mind returned to the present.

This wasn't Nehrim.

He was in Uunil-Yâr.

This wasn't Nehrim.

The year was 8226.

His eyes burning from the smoke, he oriented himself. They were on Fortune Road, standing before the Great Bazaar. The city stood in flames.

The chaos had unfolded gradually. Even without the columns of smoke rising over the alabaster walls, they would have noticed something wasn't right as they made the last mile to the gates of the Golden City. The lack of travelers on the road. The way the farms and adobe huts of the Makehu seemed deserted, the doors shut despite the heat. The absence of patrols.

The colossal city gate was open, but instead of Blue Guards, a good dozen commoners kept watch, together with three black-robed figures who stood with backs erect and hands folded behind their backs. Since an abrupt turn would only have made them suspicious and this was the only way inside, they crossed to the gate at a slow canter, and all the while Jespar's guts contracted into a tight ball.

"What's your business?" one of the black figures asked. A woman.

"We're travelers," Lysia said. Perhaps it was the almost casual tone of her voice that eased the suspicion in the Scythe's eyes. As if their lives didn't hang on a spider's thread.

The woman snorted. "Go back to Port Vaju, outlanders."

A pause.

Following a hunch, Jespar said, "We're on your side. The dream is rotten."

Another of the Scythes stepped beside them, two narrowed eyes studied them from under bushy eyebrows. "You two are pigskins. Why would you care?"

Taking the cue, Lysia gave a sigh, just the right amount of cautious and annoyed. “Look, all we know is that the Twins want us to be here and fight in the riot.” She glanced into the city. “Though you seem to be doing just fine. If you want us to head back, fine by us—we have our money, so…”

“All right, all right,” the woman said. “Go ahead. Just follow Fortune Road and talk to one of the brothers or sisters when you find the crowd—they’ll give you instructions.”

They passed. When the gate was well behind them, Jespar gave a long exhale. His teeth hurt from clenching his jaw. The inside of the city confirmed what they’d already known. And, still, there was something eerie about how the streets lay deserted as they led their horses through the Stone District, the colorful festoons for the Rain Festival hanging limply against the bleak afternoon sky. There were no fires yet—only barred windows and locked doors. What few people they encountered looked hurried and disoriented, and fled into the next alley or house as Jespar, Lysia, and Kawu approached.

The first sign of violence was in a bakery. They were still in the Stone District, and the shop was modest, just a narrow, oblong room parallel to the road, in the bottom half of a two story, adobe house. The tables out front were overturned, baskets dotting the gravel road, baked goods spilled all over the ground. The door stood open, revealing the plundered shelves inside. Looting. The closer they got to the Steel District, the more numerous sights like this became. A woman wept in front of her emptied store. A man in good clothes, cowering against a wall, his face bloody. What seemed to be a bathing house, the glass windows—a rare sight in the poor districts—shattered and “LEECH” smeared against the front wall in bright red paint.

At a circular plaza Jespar recognized from his first foray into the city a week ago, they found the first corpses: eight Blue Guards, piled up like a heap of butcher’s waste. “Don’t look,” Jespar said to Kawu. Kawu just nodded.

Once they crossed the gate to the Steel District, it was a descent into havoc. Every other house was vandalized, many of them torched, with flames licking out of the stone windows. Smoke rose into the ash-colored sky, the tang of fire permeating the air.

Slowly but surely, the din in the distance lost its shapeless, muddled quality and turned into a weave of shouts and screams. The mob. There was a rhythmic quality to it, as if they were chanting something, but Jespar couldn't make out what they said. In front of an official-looking building, there had been a skirmish, a good dozen guards sharing the dust with workers and Scythes. Blood soaked into the gravel and coated the steps to the building's archway.

What they saw at the Great Bazaar was only the logical conclusion of what they'd seen so far, and yet, when Jespar saw the mayhem under the great stone pavilion, his mind blanked out and he was back in Nehrim. But it wasn't Nehrim, he told himself.

This wasn't the village, this wasn't Nehrim, this wasn't the Civil War.

He blinked, forced his awareness into his body, felt the burning in his legs from the long days in the saddle, close to numbness but not quite there, felt the way his shoulder wound throbbed under his bandage. He looked ahead, where the Great Bazaar rose into the smoke-thick sky.

The Great Bazaar was devastated. The tables lining the aisles overturned or broken, stalls ruined—some shattered, some aflame. Bodies slumped against the square pillars, lay in the dirt or sprawled over tables, the faint shafts of light falling through the skylights in the ceiling, guards and citizens, workers and nobles. Solitary shapes moved through the hazy gloom, looting what was left of the stalls and stores, running through the aisles and shouting names. Some just stood there and stared into the middle distance. Near the entrance, four men struggled, seemingly over looted goods.

Why hadn't they fled? Judging by the trail Jespar had followed, the riot must have been going for some time before it reached the Steel District, so someone must have warned them of the danger coming their way, or even tried to evacuate the bazaar. And yet there were so many bodies, as if the mob had crashed right into the regular noon bustle of the bazaar. Why? Perhaps, Jespar thought, some of them were vendors who had refused to abandon their goods, their livelihood. Perhaps, some hadn't heard the warning amid all the chatter, the shouting, and the music. Perhaps, some simply hadn't believed it. A rampaging mob, here in the Golden City? Ludicrous.

A man in ragged clothes came running from under the pavilion, a stack of silver plates tucked under his arm. He gave the three riders a glance that was strangely apologetic then ran off, dropping a plate in the process.

"Off the road," Lysia said and steered her horse into a nearby alley, whose adjacent buildings were relatively unscathed. "Now."

Jespar looked at the bazaar a moment longer then followed. Lysia eyed him warily. "What happened? You froze."

"I'm fine. Really."

"Jespar, if there's—"

"I remembered something, is all. I'm good, otherwise, I'd tell you."

Lysia held his gaze then nodded. She tipped her chin northward, at Mount Uunil. "See that?"

Jespar squinted. In the distance, the white, blocky manors of the Jade District rose on the slope of the mountain, thinning out toward the top, as the slope got steeper and the palaces more luxurious. A veil of smoke hung above the lower half of the district, its underside lighted by the orange glow of the fires that birthed it. Even from down here, it was obvious that the destruction in the noble's district was far worse.

"They've already passed the Jade District," he said.

"No, that's not what I mean. Look closely, on Fortune Road."

Standing up in his stirrups, Jespar looked again, shielding his sight against the sun that stung hot against his eyes even behind the cover of clouds. A shifting mass filled the broad road that snaked its way up through the district and up the mountain. He froze when he understood what he was looking at.

"Saaras'jodule," Kawu said beside him. "Is that…?"

Lysia nodded, her eyes without expression. "That's the mob."

Starting somewhere in the shadows of the white manors, a crowd so dense it seemed like a uniform mass carpeted Fortune Road. Like a colossal, legless chameleon, it slithered forward, the colors shifting, bright dots mingling with patches of black, workers and Scythe. In its wake, it left a trail of fire. It had already advanced through most of the

Jade District and was approaching the city border where the cobblestone plazas and luxurious manors gave way to the rainforest. They were approaching the ziggurats.

Oonai.

"If they make it into the First Ziggurat," Lysia said, "then we're done for."

Jespar pressed his eyes shut, thoughts shooting through his mind like erratic sparks. Two guards on horses dashed past them, toward the bazaar. Somewhere, a woman screamed.

"No. No, we're not, not if the plan works."

Lysia tilted her head, then understanding flickered across her eyes. "Right. The trap."

Jespar nodded. "If the Scythe is following the Overgrowth Plan, and it seems as though they are, General Duul is going to intercept the mob before it makes it to the First Ziggurat. Remember what Ganêrys said? The main body of the Blue Guard is reserved for the trap." He looked around. "It would explain why there are so few guards around."

"Fair point." Absently, Lysia patted her horse across the rump. The mount's ears were swiveling, a sign of anxiety. "Still, we should try to get ahead of the mob as fast as we can. We don't want to be caught in the fight. Plus, the sooner we get that parasite dealt with, the sooner Oonai can intervene."

Jespar glanced at the mob, their shouting rhythmic and martial. "I don't think there's anything he can do at this point."

"Well, let me put it this way: *If* anyone can still stop this, it's Oonai. But you're right, no point in getting our hopes up—you're the number one priority."

Jespar said, "There's also the possibility that Enkshi or Ma'saa Oonai already evacuated the ziggurat. Or that Vel'Nyx might not be asleep when we try to locate her."

Lysia pressed her eyes shut, massaged her temples. Then, she opened her eyes and tied her greasy hair back into a ponytail. Amid the chaos around them, there was something strangely soothing about the gesture. "We'll think about that when we get there."

She rode back toward Fortune Road. When Jespar was about to follow, he noticed Kawu wasn't moving, a distant expression on his face. Jespar reached for his hand.

"Hey."

Kawu blinked, turned to face him. The bags under his eyes had gotten worse, and his skin had a sickly pallor to it.

You got him into this.

"Hm?" Kawu said.

"We need to go."

Kawu's face remained blank, as if Jespar had spoken in a foreign tongue. Then, he nodded. "I'm coming."

They reached the tail of the mob some thirty minutes later. Unlike the main crowd, which looked like a single, giant organism, the rear consisted mostly of separate groups following along and vandalizing whatever the forerunners hadn't already. A cacophony of voices hung over the crowd, structured only by the repeated chanting of that single sentence that was now discernible: "The dream is rotten."

The mob left a swathe of destruction.

Everything that was flammable burned: houses, trees, even people. The smell of burnt flesh hung in the air, continuously attempting to jerk Jespar's mind into the past, into the memories he'd tried to bury. Heat enfolded them, singeing Jespar's sunburned skin, sweat beading on his upper lip, neck, and forehead. Corpses lay in the mob's trail: peasants, guards, and many, many nobles, their silken robes dyed crimson. A man hung from a lamppost, a red, gaping hole in his gut, entrails hanging out. "Leech" was cut into his forehead in five bloody letters. Bile rose in Jespar's throat but he kept the vomit down. He wondered how the man's murderers had decided he was one of the "leeches" and not just the servant of one. None of his garments suggested wealth, and he wore no jewelry. Looking up ahead, where Fortune Road wound its serpentine way up the famed mountain, Jespar's palms felt cold. Neither Kawu nor Lysia nor himself were "leeches," but, somehow, he had the feeling that this wouldn't have made a difference had they been unfortunate enough to run into the mob head on.

They slowed their horses to a trot and followed the mob for a bit, but when the suspicious glances from the tail of the crowd increased, Jespar turned into a secluded

alley and motioned Lysia and Kawu to follow. “We should walk from here. We have to blend in if this is supposed to work.”

Lysia hesitated, probably weighing the safety of the horses as a means of escape if things got ugly against the attention they drew, as Jespar had done himself. At last, she nodded. “Okay.”

They dismounted and sent their horses off with a clap on their hindquarters. Then, they continued their ascent, using the numerous, branching alleys that bisected the villas of the Jade District to circumvent the mob whenever they could, and blending into its sidelines when they couldn’t. The closer they got to the main body, the louder and more visceral the shouts became until they permeated the air like some demonic incantation: *The dream is rotten.* They passed a man being dragged out of his house screaming, then a guardswoman pinned against the wall by the three men, one of them swathed in the black robes of the Scythe. Both times, Jespar gripped his daggers tighter. Both times, they had no choice but to go on.

At one point, one of the alleys branching off of Fortune Road ended in a stone stair that led up to a small orchard, at the center of which stood a statue of Morala. They paused some moments to catch their breath and orient themselves. When Jespar leaned on the banister to look back over the city behind them, the horror truly sunk in.

It wasn’t in the immensity of the mob, it wasn’t in the way their boots shook the earth, wasn’t how they thrust their weapons and torches up each time they chanted their incantation. It wasn’t in the pillaging and the vandalism, it wasn’t in the butchering. The horror was a feeling shapeless as grief at a burial, as the quiet before the storm, as the stare between a wolf and its prey, a feeling intangible and yet so powerful, so visceral, so sickening that it overshadowed everything else in Jespar’s mind.

Hatred.

What he witnessed was a seething, pestilent hatred that had infected thousands of people with its poison, a hatred that would bring a fisherwoman to gut a nobleman like a trout, made a young farm boy batter the friendly guardsman’s skull in like a rotten fruit, made a man set fire to another’s house and defile his wife. It was a hatred that smothered

all senses, dissolved the fragile skeleton that held the flesh of their morals, a hatred that reduced mankind to their basest instincts.

And it had been growing for a long time. It had grown in the quiet contempt Jespar had seen in the Makehu worker's stare a week ago, when the guards had denied him and his daughter access to the natural pool. It had grown in the hearts of the harbor workers who had protested as "yet another have-not's" body had washed up in the Golden City's filthy sewers when Jespar, Lysia, and Kawu had returned from Yuva. It was the fruit of centuries of injustice and exploitation, a virulent, brittle growth that had infested the parched soil of their hearts and minds and had only waited for the spark that would burst it into flames.

The Overgrowth Plan had worked—the inferno was here.

Fortune Road left behind the lazy waves of the Jade District and flowed up a steep slope. There were no side alleys they could take, and the narrowing of the road forced the mob into a single, cramped file. Jespar, Lysia, and Kawu tried to shoulder through the sidelines, but, at some point, it simply became impossible with the sheer number of bodies that blocked their path. Cold sweat mingled with hot as Jespar was shoved at from all sides. The air was sour and sharp from the smoke, heat, and the thousands of people who greedily sucked it into their lungs.

Someone pulled at his arm. Jespar started, then realized it was Lysia. Unintentionally or on purpose, she had drawn her shawl higher into her face. She held Kawu's hand. His gaunt face still carried that same numb look of disbelief. Lysia shouted something, but Jespar didn't hear. Someone shoved Jespar from behind, and he almost fell over.

"Move, Brother!" a man clad in sable said. Scythe.

Jespar muttered an apology and stumbled on forward. Ignoring the rising unease in his throat, he craned his neck to look for Lysia and saw her and Kawu move back through the sideline, ignoring the curses of the rioters. Jespar followed her example, shoving his way through the sea of bodies. After what seemed like an eternity, he finally reached the foot of the slope where the road opened up again and he broke out of the crowd. It felt as if a steel clamp that had been around his chest had sprung open. His breath fast and shallow,

he tried to orient himself. Fenced manors expanded to either side of the road, streaked by tree-lined cobblestone pathways. Most of the manors were aflame, and people either hurried out of or toward them. On a property just behind Jespar, a group of rioters rampaged through the garden, burning the flowerbeds and trees, knocking down the sculptures framing the garden path. Two corpses lay next to the entrance stairs. Slowly, the sun sank toward the western ocean, but as the clouds had grown thicker and darker only a faint bloody halo hinted at its presence. Farther down the road, a figure by the roadside gestured in his direction. *Lysia.* Kawu stood beside her. Jespar crossed to them, ducking his head as he passed two Scythes, who stoked up the mob by punching their scimitars into the air and screaming their war cry, over and over.

"Thank the gods," Lysia said. "I thought I'd lost you in the mob."

"So did I. Are you all right?"

"Yeah… I think so. Stars burn me, this is insanity."

Jespar glanced at the mob and mumbled a reply. He studied Kawu. There were soot stains on his skin, and his hair clung in thick strands to his forehead. "Everything okay?"

Kawu nodded weakly.

Running her hands through her hair, Lysia looked at the First Ziggurat. It was still a white miniature pyramid in the far distance. "Well, this isn't working. If we keep going at this pace, we'll never make it to the ziggurat before morning, let alone before the mob does."

"I noticed," Jespar said, massaging his eyebrow with thumb and forefinger.

"Any ideas?"

Jespar mulled it over, but his mind remained blank. It was as if the din and the chaos had cast a red fog in his brain that made it impossible to think.

"I have one," Kawu said. Jespar and Lysia looked at him.

"What?" Lysia asked.

Kawu told them.

They found what they were looking for in a secluded courtyard a bit farther down the mountain. Though it was a good five minutes' walk from Fortune Road, the riot hadn't

spared it. Groups of peasants and Scythes scoured through the alleys, torching, looting, and killing whatever they could find. The chanting of the mob carried through the air like a malevolent echo.

"The dream is rotten.

"The dream is rotten.

"The dream is rotten."

A pagoda stood in the center of the courtyard, encircled by flowerbeds and four palm trees. Just like three of the four houses that framed the square, the pagoda was aflame, and the fire had jumped over onto two of the palms, filling the air with the sharp tang of fire. Corpses littered the polished cobblestone. Kawu cast a furtive glance around then nodded at two bodies lying close to each other.

Scythes.

A burning palm frond crashed down not far from the corpses, sending up a swirl of sparks. Lysia frowned. "You sure you want to do this?"

"I don't want to," Kawu said wearily, "but it seems like our only chance."

Lysia glanced at Jespar, as if looking for support. He nodded slowly.

She sighed. "All right."

Not much later, they were shrouded in the black robes of the dead rioters. As none of them wanted to wear the bloodstained clothes directly on their skin, they'd put them over their armor, which made the heat a lot worse. While Lysia was still busy adjusting her hood, Jespar looked at Kawu. What little peeked through the black cowl was deathly pale and his eyes had a glassy look about them, as if looking into the depths of a lake. When Kawu noticed the concern in Jespar's eyes, he gave him a smile, but it was lifeless. Jespar went over to Kawu.

"We'll get through this, okay? Together."

It was a while before Kawu answered. "And what about the rest?" Tying his belt, he flicked a glance at the corpses on the square. "All those people, dead. And what for? Just because a bitter man and a bitter woman wanted more of what they already had." He shook his head. "No, don't say anything, Jespar. All this… it was bound to happen

eventually, wasn't it? I grew up on an island ruled over by criminals—they do the same, all the time, they want more and more and more, like a greedy child who can't tell his belly is full."

Jespar studied Kawu. "And yet you sound bitter."

Kawu cinched his belt into a knot. "Maybe because I hoped that here, in the golden parts of the country, things would be different... That people would be different." He paused. "They're not. All this… it just seems to be in our nature."

Jespar wanted to reply but realized he had nothing to say. Kawu's words could have been his own, and, for this one time, he wished it were different.

"I suppose all we can do now," Kawu said, "is to save what we still can. And I think I've finally come to terms with it. You're one of those things."

Lysia crossed to them. "Ready when you are."

Jespar held Kawu's gaze a moment longer. Then he nodded.

Kawu refocused Jespar, then they returned to the slope, where the throng still filled the road to the brim, a crowd so massive it seemed even a mountain like Uunil couldn't hold them.

When they filed back into the sidelines of the crowd, it was suddenly possible not only to advance, but also to stay together—people almost moved out of their way on their own. Once or twice a rioter gave them a frown as they jostled their way past, but their eyes dropped to the ground when Jespar returned a hard stare. Still, it took them at least another hour until the steep path at last flowed into the jungle. They'd reached the end of the Jade District. Moving just fast enough not to attract attention, they pressed ahead.

When they arrived in the front quarter of the mob, Jespar first realized how well-coordinated the riot really was. Whenever the mob passed a villa or a palace, a Scythe would detach from the throng and take a dozen or more rioters with him to direct them to their target, and let their fury do the work. As powerful as it was, they left nothing to chance. For every obstacle, the terrorists had an answer: Battering rams to tear down the gates, archers to take out the guards, fire bowls to make sure the mob's torches never went out.

And still no guards in sight.

Except for the patrols who'd been but drops of water splashed into a rolling wall of fire, the mob appeared to have rampaged through the Golden City without restraint. *The Overgrowth Plan,* Jespar thought. Everything suggested Ganêrys's theory was true, to the last detail. The Blue Guard was part of it, letting the riot happen so they could quash them in the "trap," whatever it might look like. And Oonai and Vel'Nyx would reap all the glory.

To their right, Fortune Road branched off into a broad gravel path, at the end of which rose the great alabaster walls of the Seventh Ziggurat. Briefly, Jespar felt a touch of hope—though not as massive as the defenses of the First, its walls and gate could rival any fortress, and a line of archers manned the parapets. Even a mob as large as this one would suffer heavy casualties before they could hope to break through the gate—if their morale even held up that long.

As if to mock his thought, a horn blared from behind and the crowd parted, giving way to four Scythes maneuvering a cartload of barrels through the mob, turning right at the fork. Another cart followed, this one carrying a mighty bronze cylinder on four wheels. *Fire-spitter,* Jespar thought numbly. A masterpiece of Starling siege weaponry capable of hurling a fifty pound metal sphere at its target when loaded with a special sort of powder that exploded upon ignition.

Lysia pressed his shoulder. "Come on."

Some minutes later they heard a dull bang cut above the shouting—for a breath, it was silent and heads turned. Another bang, and another, followed by a crash. Cheers in the distance, then all around them.

The chanting resumed.

"What was that?" Kawu asked. He walked beside Jespar, their shoulders touching.

"I think they made it into the Seventh Ziggurat. The fire-spitters did their job."

"Fire-spitters?"

"Doesn't matter."

They pushed on, passing the Sixth Ziggurat. On the wall above the gate, a woman in golden robes leaned against the parapet, and even from a distance Jespar could see the bewilderment in her face. An arrow shot from the crowd, going for the woman. It missed by arm-lengths but still elicited roaring cheers from the mob. A man in a blue uniform appeared behind the golden-robed woman and pulled her out of sight.

Again, the horn blared behind Jespar. Again, Scythes pushed fire-spitters into position.

Jespar, Kawu, and Lysia walked on. After the Fifth Ziggurat, Kawu refocused Jespar by the wayside.

It was almost dark.

Interlude

Sixteen Days Before

AS THE MAN LAYS OUT HIS PLAN to revoke the Golden Soil Decree and pay reparations to the people who suffered harm under it, it's likely only his stature that stops the other magnates from outright bursting into laughter. Sensing this, the Man grows first irritated then angry, until he begins to shout. Even while he does it, a section of his brain knows it's the worst thing he could possibly do—in rhetoric, emotion is a powerful tool, but only when used judiciously and with calculation. Controlled anger is terrifying. Tantrums are ludicrous.

Throughout it all, the Third Magnate studies him with an unmoving expression, sitting on her raised marble aisle under the giant statue of Morala, which rises on the opposite side of the conclave hall.

The Coalition nearly universally turns down his appeal.

Shaking with fury, the Man withdraws into his office above the hall and sits at his desk, which stands before a giant window gallery that overlooks the gleaming alabaster city. The sun sets in shades of purple and orange. There's a knock on the door.

The Man pauses.

"Enter."

The door opens and reveals the aging, vulpine face of the Second Magnate. Rings adorn each of his fingers and his eyes are lined with kohl, an old custom among male nobles that has long since gone out of fashion. Gently, he pushes the door shut then crosses to the Man's desk, his eyes casually wandering about the room as if admiring the architecture.

"You look tired, old friend," he says.

"What the hell do you want?"

Fool, he thinks. You don't start conversation like this with insults. It makes you seem rash and the other person seem reasonable, before the item of discussion is even brought up.

The Second Magnate sighs and runs a hand through his gray, shoulder length hair. Then, he speaks. His words are friendly and well-chosen, their message is clear: If "something like this" were ever to happened again, the Man would have to resign from his position.

The Man eyes the Second Magnate in disbelief: Clearly, he'd gone mad. He'd forgotten who he was talking to. But the Second Magnate's smile stayed on, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Are you threatening me?" the Man asks in a tone he notices is reminiscent of his old self. A hot tingle rushes into his throat.

The Second Magnate raises his eyebrows. "Why, I'm not."

"I think you are. Perhaps I should remind you that threats against me have a tendency not to end well for the ones who issue them."

The Second Magnate studies the Man with an expression somewhere between curiosity and surprise. "Let me show you something." He reaches into his pockets and produces two scrolls from under his robes. "Read." After a brief pause, he adds: "If you will."

Frowning, the Man takes the scrolls and unfolds them. Two minutes later, his indignation and anger is gone. The Second Magnate is right. Of course he is.

"If a member of the Coalition ever acts against the Coalition's interests, the Coalition reserves the right to issue a vote of no confidence," the Second Magnate says, his back now leaning against the window sill. "And I daresay that revoking a decree you yourself initiated and throwing money at a bunch of have-nots qualifies as acting against our interests, wouldn't you say?"

The Man remains silent.

He knows this. Of course he knows this, because it was none other than he himself who fought for this legislation in the first place—to prevent the conservative wing of the Coalition from halting progress.

How on Vyn could he forget?

The Second Magnate turns to look outside, drumming his fingers on the granite sill. “Let me be perfectly clear, old friend. I have nothing but respect and admiration for you, and I mean that. If you remember, I was one of your first supporters when you started campaigning for First Magnate, and, until recently, I believed I was right to do so. Your recent actions—missing conclaves, public fits of anger, and now this—make me question that. What is it you’re trying to do? Turn our country into a charity house?"

“It was a mistake,” the Man says under his breath.

“That fiasco down there? Indeed it was.”

“The decree was a mistake.”

Again, the Second Magnate sighs. “Why? *You* proposed it, so why the sudden change of heart?”

“I just told you, in the conclave.”

“Well, I want to hear it again.”

An order. Not a request. He can't let that stand. He has to show this man his rightful place, reestablish his authority. But he doesn’t. Instead, the black fog moves his lips for him like a ventriloquist’s puppet. “Because it’s evil. Because we stole the last grains of rice from those who have nothing and threw them into our own greedy mouths just to grow fatter than we already are, and laughed when they decided that no life is better than one without dignity.”

The Second Magnate’s face doesn’t move. “You’re talking about the suicides.”

The Man’s fingers dig hard into the wood of his desk. "You know damn well what I’m talking about."

More swearing. *Stop it, stop it, stop!*

The Second Magnate rolls his eyes. “If I remember correctly, the expression ‘killing oneself’ implies a voluntary act. The rules got harder, and, instead of using the new rules to their advantage, they decided to flip the board and call it quits. Tough luck. You’ve said it yourself: There are hundreds of ways a have-not could use the decree to their advantage, but—"

"Fuck you!"

For a breath, even the Second Magnate seems shocked. Inside the Man, something winces, curses him, tried to make him stop, but it's pointless. The fog has him.

"You know nothing, godsdammit! You're as rotten as the fucking rest! Saaras'jodule—how can you be so blind?!" He shoots a finger at the haggard old man beside him, that man who dares to saunter into his room, *his* room as if this was some kazuum brothel and order him around like a coinless whore. "It's *us*, don't you see it? We're the sickness, we're the destroyers, we bring death, and, if you can live like this, fine, but I just can't take it anymore—it's fucking smothering me, and I… I…" He breaks into a sob, tears burning on his cheeks. Moaning, he drops his face in his hands, his fingers digging into his scalp. "Gods, I just want to stop feeling this way! I just want it to *stop*!"

Minutes pass. The Man's sobs are all that fills the silence. Evening sunlight pours into the room, reflecting on the immaculate, polished marble. When the Second Magnate speaks again, his voice has changed. Before, there was still a wary kind of respect behind his challenging tone. Now, his voice sounds flat, uneasy, the way one speaks to a war-shocked soldier or a man who has tremors and might burst into a fit at any moment.

"Clear your mind, old friend. Go home to your wife, take a rest, see a medicus." He goes to the door. His hand lingers on the handle for a moment, then he casts the Man a last look over his shoulder. "I was your first supporter, old friend," he says, "but, if this continues, I'll be the first to stop you. Are we clear?"

Numbly, the Man nods.

"Good."

He leaves.

Back in the ziggurat, the Man brushes off his wife and goes straight to his study. There, he writes a letter to the Third Magnate, requesting a meeting this very night. He can't undo the drought, fine, but he can still stop the wildfire.

The Third Magnate answers the same evening, agreeing to the meeting, but not before the day after tomorrow and alone and on neutral ground. Two days drag by, which the Man spends pacing up and down his locked study, not eating, not drinking, not talking,

desperately trying to move his mind to what little corners are left that the black fog hasn't yet poisoned.

I do what I want.

Every sin leaves a mark.

You're a monster.

I do what I want.

The meeting takes place at night, on a natural clearing near the ziggurat. A waterfall splashes in the distance, a mild wind goes and carries away some of the relentless, high-Drought heat. The Third Magnate, clad in her trademark gray robes, which stand out for their simplicity, watches him approach, her hands buried in the stomach pocket of her robes. *Probably holding on to a dagger*, the Man thinks. *She thinks I'm here to kill her*. They sit down on a solitary bench by the wayside, one the Man and his wife often sat on during the long walks they had taken in the early days of their marriage.

"Well?" the Third Magnate asks, in that low, warm, almost amiable voice that had led many of her opponents to underestimate her.

Remembering his conversation with the Second Magnate, the Man draws a deep breath before speaking and summons up what little composure the black fog has left him.

No insults.

No anger.

Control.

He tells her they'd have to call off the plan. Too much collateral damage, too much bloodshed, it would strike a wound in the islands' flesh that wouldn't heal. He thought it over, and the chances that the coup would actually succeed are far slimmer than General Duul and the Twins claim. It's an insanity that will not only cost thousands of lives but also their own.

She listens patiently, not once lowering her gaze. When the Man finishes, her eyes veer off toward the jungle and remain there for a long while.

She turns her face back to the Man and puts an arm around his shoulder.

For her—a woman who, as the workers often joked, had seen more cunts than a cathouse and less cocks than a convent—it is a gesture so unusual that the Man first tenses, expecting her to follow up with a stab into his chest. A strange relief comes with the thought: death while trying to atone. That isn't so bad, is it? Maybe this is why he has agreed to meet her alone in the first place.

The stab doesn't come.

"No."

The Man stares at her, his eyeballs burning from lack of sleep.

Her features soften. "There was plenty of time for doubt, but it's too late now and you know it. Even if it weren't, how do you intend to stop it anyway? Just call it all off?"

"We could silence the general and abolish the Scythe."

"The mercenaries, you mean."

"Those albino lunatics and their cohorts."

"And what about their foot-soldiers? The Scythe must number in the thousands by now, and those people won't leave just because their leaders disappear. If anything, they'll think the Coalition tracked them down and murdered them."

"Kill the shepherd and the sheep scatter."

She smiles wanly. "Except we're dealing with wolves, not sheep, and ravenous ones at that. Gods, we spent the last year starving them, and the Scythe whetted their fangs. They have hideouts and representatives on every island, and an entire armory at their disposal that we provided for them. If we remove the leaders, they'll just find themselves new ones, and those won't let their forces saunter right into General Duul's trap if there's a riot. No, a Scythe without our inside men pulling the strings will get us an army of real revolutionaries, and months, probably years of guerrilla war. You heard the Coalition: They're not going to revoke the Golden Soil Decree now that they're making money off it, and, if anything, the Scythe and the protests have strengthened those who seek some liberal reform, which, in turn, will only stoke the workers and strengthen the Scythe even further. It's a downward spiral that can only end in violence… which is, unless I misremember, precisely what you wanted." She pauses, her thumb tracing the contour of

her jaw. Unlike most Coalition members, she wears no jewelry. “And all that’s not even considering the risk that the Twins might decide to talk if we cut them off, continued payments or not. There’s a lot of money to be made in revealing a conspiracy, don’t you think? The loot from the riot would make up for it, but, if the riot never happens, well…”

“They were always a liability. Hell, for all we know, they might decide to talk even if… if the plan succeeds.”

“If the plan succeeds,” she says, “it doesn’t matter anymore. We’ll be in power, and, where there’s no judge, there’s no hangman. We discussed this. Over and over. It’s too late to back out now, and you know it."

To this, the Man has no reply.

“You’re not thinking straight,” she says. “Something has gotten into you, and it has clearly… clouded your judgment. Gods, just look at yourself. You look like a beggar from Yuva who somehow got his hands on the clothes of a noble. This isn’t you… you’re not yourself.”

Anger rushes into the Man’s temples. “You don’t get it. You just don’t understand.”

“Indeed, I don’t.” She withdraws her arm, her fingers brushing against the nape of the Man’s neck. “But I do understand that we’re in this together. And I will not let you drag me down with you because you’ve suddenly decided to become a saint and save the world from poverty and war.”

The Man makes a sound that was half-chuckle, half-scoff. “A saint? That’s what you think this is about?”

“Frankly, I don’t know what this is about.”

“How about not becoming a godsdamned monster?”

Surprise passes her face. Then, she gives an almost childlike chuckle.

The Man’s eyes narrow to a slit. “You think this is funny?”

She chuckles again.

He stares at her, his eyes two black pits that, only moons ago, would have been enough to make any sane man or woman shiver, magnate or worker.

Still smiling, she shakes her head. “You already are.”

"… What?"

"You heard me. You already are a 'monster,' and so am I. See, this is the part about you I never understood. Even back then, when we were sauntering through that hedge maze of yours and calmly discussed the plan, you miraculously found a way to weave it into that pretty little story you keep telling yourself where you're the good guy. 'The world is an arena,' 'chances, not obstacles,' 'the others just didn't work hard enough,' blah, blah, blah. You know, it even took me a while to realize you were actually serious about this nonsense, and, even now, it's beyond my understanding how you could be. Pride, perhaps? Sometimes, I wonder if that's all men are about. You have no qualms about killing people if it serves your end, as long as you find a way to tell yourself it was 'necessary,' 'justified,' or the other one 'had it coming to them.'" She sighs, running a hand through her ear-long gray hair. "No, my dear friend. If unbridled selfishness at the cost of others is what makes a monster, then we are just that. Maybe, you never wanted to be one, or, maybe, you lost touch with reality, but it doesn't matter. I, for my part, am perfectly aware of who I am and what other people see me as."

Heavy silence follows. "So, you admit to being a monster?" the Man says.

She shrugs. "Monster, saint, evil, good… why is it that we Civilized Races are the only animals who feel the need to label their actions? No one blames the wolf for killing the deer, do they? Struggle is just in its nature, as it is in ours. The strong eat the weak—there's nothing prideful about it, nothing noble—it's just something that always has been and always will be. But, yuz, judging by that fairy tale we call 'culture,' I am undoubtedly a bad person. I have lied, cheated, and murdered to be where I am, and I'm perfectly aware of it. Unlike you, it seems."

The Man's eyes grow hot, tears form on his lower eyelids. *You mustn't,* he thinks. *You mustn't.* Thoughts race through his mind, elaborate rhetorical card-houses of why she is wrong, misguided, but the fog smothers them before he can articulate them. When he speaks at last, all he manages is: "How? How can you live like this?"

The corners of her mouth draw up in a thin smile. "Truth be told? Just fine."

She stands and straightens her robes. Fine wrinkles run along the sun-dotted backs of her palms. “If suffering is what you’re concerned with, remember that stopping the plan at this stage will only cause more of it. Once the coup is through, though, you can be as saintly a king as there ever was. But, for now, there’s nothing you can achieve but an actual civil war, and our mutual downfall. You’ll lose it all, and the Coalition will hang us both from the front wall.”

The Man doesn’t lift his eyes. “And if I don’t care?”

“You should,” she says. “If not for your own good, then for that of your sweet, good-hearted wife, your coal-man friend, and all those have-nots you suddenly care so much about.”

She made her leave. When she was several steps away, the Man speaks up. “I’ll find a way. With or without you.”

She stops and looks back. “And I’ll be prepared.”

The Man sits still on his bench for a long time. Only when the sky lightens does he return to one of the two hundred and fifty-seven rooms of the ziggurat, those dead rooms no soul had ever slept in. He lies down on the canopy bed, presses the heels of his palms against his eyes, and thinks.

He is the First Magnate.

He is the richest man in the Civilized World.

He is a god.

Then how on Vyn can it be so hard to do good? By the end of the day, he hasn’t moved. His back is sore, his stomach burns with hunger, his throat is dry as a bone. A headache has come in the afternoon hours, but he ignores it. There is a solution, there has to be. And he won’t leave this room until he finds it.

Interlude

Six Days Before

SEVEN DAYS LATER, AND THE MAN IS STILL HERE, lying in his bed, staring at the ceiling. He hasn't found a solution, but plenty more to think about. The bas-relief in said ceiling, for example: Like most in his ziggurat, it shows a scene from early Kiléan history—the Light-Born striking a treaty with the High-Chieftain of the Makehu, backdropped by a stylized setting sun. It is one of the most expensive works in the place, having cost him around ten thousand sêr. Or was it twenty? He doesn't remember. He knows it's more than Popâ would have made in two lifetimes.

Ugly.

It's showy, it's tasteless, it conveys no warmth, no spirit, no soul. It's a meaningless display of power and wealth.

And that's the point, isn't it? *Power and wealth*, the brick and clay his life is built upon, the touchstones for the refurbishment of the ziggurat he ordered when the former First Magnate had handed him the keys twenty years ago, the refurbishment that took six years and cost two million sêr to complete. Every room redone, every sculpture replaced, every tree ripped out and sowed again, and, if tearing down the entire place and building it anew wouldn't have taken a lifetime, he would have had it done without the batting of an eyelash. *Why?* He tries to remember the nonsense explanation he'd given the other magnates, who had argued that the ziggurats shouldn't be altered, that they were the abodes of the gods as much as they were those of the magnates, that they were symbols of Kilé as much as the swords and scarab emblem. He'd said something about turning it into the beacon of a new era, about progress over tradition, the usual maxims that sold well with the Big Dreamers. Had he meant it? Part of him, perhaps. The other inwardly

scowled at their dumb faces, those fools who dared tell him what he should and shouldn't do.

Power and wealth.

His eyes trace the contours of Morala's stone likeness above his bed, whom the Makehu High-Chieftain ceremonially passes her Bone Crown. The symbol of the Blue Islands, which the Light-Born had sworn to guard with all the respect it deserves and that now grows dusty in some forgotten vault of the Coalition.

Power.

Wealth.

Emptiness.

In a way, looking at the relief is like looking into a mirror.

Someone knocks on the door. Muffled words sound from behind the ornate mahogany. It's her again, his wife. When the servants found the room he's hiding in, and he refused to open, they first tried to pry open the door. Only when the man shouted that he'd have whoever stepped into this room without his consent executed by the morrow did his wife ordered them to stop. Ever since, like a dog returning time and again to the undiscovered corpse of its master, she and his counselor had taken turns coming to the door and knocking, gently asking him to come out. He ignored them, just as he ignores her now.

His wife, his *vaota*, his first love.

She was one of the three people under whose smile he knows hides no deceit, contempt, or self-interest. She loves him, he has no doubts about that. Does he love her?

Yuz.

Even amid the viscid black fog, his mind doesn't need long to find the answer—it's right there. But no joy or warmth comes with the thought—not just because he now knows he doesn't deserve her love, not just because he has been deceiving her for almost a decade, but for the simple fact that little good comes from his affection, because beneath all the glitter and allure, the Man is as lifeless as this palace. A skeleton with bones painted golden.

His wife knocks again, says something, most of which the thick wood swallows.

There's a long pause, then the sound of footfalls on marble. They fade into silence.

The Man turns his head right and looks out the window. It's bright outside, the sky a pallid blue, the sun a glaring eye bearing down on the jungle. He rolls over so he faces the opposite side of the room and curls himself into a fetal position. His armpits stink.

I can clear my name.

I can fix this.

I do what I want.

It goes on for an hour. At last, he sleeps.

Chapter 18

Sawahe

THE HEADACHE HIT JESPAR when the mob had just passed the Fourth Ziggurat. There was no panic, only a simple thought.

Too soon.

Cursing under his breath, he shouldered his way forward through the crowd, to Lysia and Kawu who had, amid the pushing and knocking of the crowd, ended up two rows ahead of him. He reached for Kawu's shoulder.

He looked into the face of a stranger. Like Kawu, he was young and Makehu and a cleft lip distorted his frown. Raising his hands apologetically, Jespar stepped backward and bumped into a rioter. Before she could react, Jespar pushed past her and into the outer line of the throng. Sweat itched on his skin, his ears hurt from the noise, his limbs from the constant jostling. A pulse hammered in his temples, hard, cold beats, each sending sharp pains all over his skull. On the roadside, his eyes rushed over the mob, looking for Kawu's or Lysia's shape amid the huddled masses.

It was pointless. At least two dozen of the insurgents wore the black of the Scythe, and most of them had their faces veiled.

Too fucking soon.

"Kawu!" he shouted, but the chanting drowned his voice.

The pain grew.

He shouted Kawu's name again, this time at the top of his lungs, but it only earned him confused glances from the passersby. He cursed then fell into a brisk step beside the mob, trying to find the place he'd been when the headache started. They had to be near, they just *had to*, he'd kept eye contact at all times, they—

Someone screamed.

Jespar spun around. A few steps over, at the edge of the jungle, a group of three rioters stood around a man curled up on the ground. One of the rioters repeatedly stabbed at him with a pitchfork, the other two kicked him. The man screamed, coiled, tried to shield himself from the attacks, but it was pointless. His eyes locked with Jespar's for a second as he rolled to the side in an attempt to escape another stab. He was young and beardless, no older than Kawu. Long, sweaty hair framed a blood-soaked face. The young noble's eyes widened and his lips moved as if forming a word.

Jespar turned away. He'd only gone four steps when a voice called out behind him.

"Boy!"

It was only a word, but his skin iced over.

Don't.

Don't look.

He looked.

One of the rioters bludgeoning the noble faced him, only it wasn't a rioter anymore. A grin split his lips, blood was spattered across his waxen forehead.

"Looking away again, huh?" The Corpse spit. "Yes, that's what you're good at."

Darkness hit. Jespar's sight went black and all strength left his knees.

The cold in his skull exploded.

It was an excruciating pain—so smothering it drowned all thought, reduced him to instinct. And yet, as he hit the ground, something else made it bearable.

Fatigue.

The Corpse sank on his haunches before him.

"Come home."

Jespar surrendered.

***

When he opened his eyes, the pain was gone. He recognized the place at once, but something was different.

Not in how it looked—the lake was still the same, endless ice under a twilight sky. Not in how it felt—the air still had that strange flux quality, neither warm nor cold.

You.

The difference was in Jespar. On his previous lucid visits to the In-Between, he still felt connected to the waking world. He was a visitor, tethered to the world of matter by an invisible cord, just as how in reality part of him always remained connected to the world of dreams. And this connection, Jespar now understood, was vital. Without the ability to fall asleep, humans were restless hulls straying through a detached world. Without the ability to awaken, they became as immaterial as an echo, doomed to fade as time went by.

Only, now, he felt this cord had grown thinner, and, once it tore, there was no returning. He'd be trapped in this place forever, in whatever nightmare that insect in his brain had prepared for him.

He had barely finished the thought when the crust under his boots gave in. He didn't scream. Not when the water devoured him. Not when the light shining through the surface had almost faded. Not when the disembodied torso of the Corpse floated up from the depths, his spine and strands of muscle dangling loose below its hips, flaps of skin coming off his skull and rising like tiny, dead fish. No, the fear was gone, because he deserved this.

Yes, in the waking world, he'd become a master at self-deception, using denial and rationalization to fool himself into believing it was any different. But here? *No.* This place showed him the truth. The dream-eater showed him the truth he'd long tried to bury, and the Corpse was its mouthpiece. It would voice his judgment.

For running.

For being a coward.

For being a traitor.

The Corpse extended his hand and Jespar took it.

Bubbles rose from Jespar's lips as he spoke. "Father."

The Corpse smiled and for the first time, there was no malice in it. This was a warm smile, a proud smile. This was the smile of a father whose son had finally learned the lesson he'd been trying to teach him for a long, long time. Slowly, the Corpse turned his gaze downward and sank, gently pulling Jespar down with him. They sank and sank and sank, father and son, down the endless ocean, down toward Jespar's *tuewa*, the place the dream-eater had prepared for him. Toward the nightmare from which was no waking.

***

A face. Someone knelt over him, both hands pressed against his temples. It felt good—warmth poured from those fingers, warmth that melted away the ice that filled his skull, clearing his sight, his head, his mind.

Giving back control.

Where am—

Gasping for air, Jespar jerked upright, knocking back the person who had saved him.

For a moment, neither he nor Jespar moved. Then reality reasserted itself. The sticky heat drove away the icy water. The roar of the mob replaced the perfect silence of the endless ocean he'd been in seconds ago. Memory returned.

Blinking to clear the veil of tears, Jespar's eyes wandered up to the man who'd saved him. Kawu sat on the ground before him, the heels of his hands dug into the grass behind his hips, his eyes flickering between concern and relief.

"Jespar?"

Jespar tried to answer, but his throat was too dry to form a sound. He coughed, clearing some of the slime. "Yeah," he managed at last. "Yeah, I'm here."

Kawu closed his eyes and let out a breath. "Gods. I thought I'd lost you."

Kawu stood and offered Jespar his hands. Jespar took them.

"I couldn't find you," Kawu said as he helped Jespar up. "One moment you were just behind me, the next you were gone. Thank the Gods you made it out of the crowd, otherwise…"

Jespar averted his eyes. “I know. Where’s Lysia?”

“She was with me when we lost you,” Kawu said, letting go of Jespar’s hands. “We split up to look for you in front of and behind us and agreed to meet further up the mountain.”

“… Good. That’s good.” He looked around. The mob marched on past them, chanting their words, the red glow of their torches enfolding the procession like an ill omen. The Corpse and the peasants were gone, the noble boy lay motionless by the roadside, his purple tunic ripped apart and his chest perforated with holes from the pitchfork. His lips were half-parted in what had probably been the onset of a scream.

“Are you all right?” Kawu asked.

Jespar exhaled. “I… I think so.” He paused. “It was different this time. It was just a hallucination at first, but then I was suddenly in that ocean.”

“The In-Between?”

“Yeah.”

Kawu exhaled. “I had suspected as much. The dream-eater must have tried to pull you into *tuewa*. I… think it’s getting close to hatching. If it hasn’t already.”

Hatching.

Jespar’s chest tightened. “It doesn’t change anything about the plan, does it? We cure Oonai, problem solved. You’ll just need to refocus me more often.”

Kawu seemed about to answer when two Scythes walked past them. They exchanged nods in acknowledgment. From farther up came another bang, followed by another roaring cheer. *The Third Ziggurat*, Jespar thought. The noose tightened.

“Come on,” Jespar said. “We can talk on the way.”

“No, wait, there’s… there’s something else.”

Jespar stopped, waiting.

Kawu ran a hand through his greasy, disheveled hair. A cowlick popped up just over his right ear. “Every time I bring you back into reality, it costs me. It’s like… Imagine giving a part of your blood to a sibling who’s losing his own. With my family, I only had

to do it once every week or so, barely a few drops, nothing the body can't restore. With you, on the other hand…" He lowered his eyes. "I think you can see where this is going."

Jespar did.

Of course he'd noticed how Kawu had grown weaker and weaker ever since they'd set out for Kaâra Manor, but he'd attributed it to exhaustion. Or wanted to.

It didn't matter. The truth was, Kawu didn't just look fatigued, but ill. He'd always been thin but now his face was gaunt, and though his skin was dark from the sun, a bloodless, almost greenish pallor shone through.

"It's killing you."

Kawu said nothing. There was another bang in the distance, then another.

"Gods, I'm… I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

Kawu waved his hand. "You didn't know because I didn't tell you. I just… I don't know, I thought this was going to be over before it became relevant. And, as you said, ultimately it doesn't matter, because it doesn't change a thing about what we have to do. I'll just have to refocus you even more often."

"But then you'll—"

For the first time since they'd met, something akin to anger flashed across Kawu's face. "What other option do we have? Leave you here? I told you one day in reality can amount to years in a dream, didn't I? Once we let that cursed thing take control of you, that's it, you'll be trapped in a nightmare for gods know how long. Is that what you want?"

Jespar averted his eyes. "No."

"There you have it." Kawu gave a long sigh and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry. It's just… I'm so tired, Jespar, so awfully tired. All I want is to lie down right here, fall asleep, and wake up in a world where none of this ever happened. Only, even there, it would happen eventually, wouldn't it? Because it just seems to be in our nature." He nodded at the mob. "Destruction. It's in all of us."

For some breaths, neither of them spoke, the distant screams, the chanting of the mob and the dull roaring of the distant fires enveloping them like an invisible bell.

You could die.

It was the first time he allowed the thought to manifest so clearly, and, somehow, it did the complete opposite of what it should have done: It killed his fear.

"Okay."

Kawu looked up, forehead creased.

"It can hardly get any worse than this, can it?" Jespar said. "And you're right: If this is how it is, we'll just have to make do with it and hurry the hell up."

Kawu gave him a doubtful look. Then his features relaxed, miles from a smile, but with a hint of hopefulness. "Well said."

Jespar squinted into the distance, where the mob slowly snaked up the road. They had reached the upper fifth of the mountain. Not much longer and they'd reach the Second Ziggurat, the last stop before Oonai's.

Where was that godsdamned trap?

"You said Lysia will be waiting up ahead?"

Kawu nodded. "By the bridge across that river just before the Oonai Ziggurat."

"Then let's get there as fast as we can. And one more thing."

"Yuz?"

"If this doesn't work out and I… well… It's not your fault, okay? None of it. You did more for me then I could have ever asked of you."

Heaviness came into Kawu's eyes, that tired sadness that made him seem so much older than he was. "I'm doing this because I want to."

They went on, staying as close together as possible. When they passed the Third Ziggurat, a palace complex of three pyramids on a precipice jutting out of the mountain, Jespar was surprised to find it in flames. He would have expected Vel'Nyx to have had the Scythe limit the destruction to her own home as much as possible, but instead the gates stood wide open, and two of the three pyramids were aflame. Scattered pockets of guards at the foot of the structure and on the tiers fought the rioters, but they might as well have been fish throwing themselves into a wildfire to quench it with the water on their scales.

Kawu glanced at Jespar, but he merely shook his head. They marched on. The Second Ziggurat, a temple-like structure cut into the mountain's slope, was only twenty minutes farther up Fortune Road, and its gates were still intact. Rows of arches positioned on the walls fired away at the insurgents who tried to bring their fire-spitters into position, downing them by the dozens. *Tenacious, but pointless.* For every rioter their arrows killed, two more filled his place. It was only a question of time.

Jespar and Kawu took a minute to catch their breath at the top of the last slope before Fortune Road began its final, winding ascent to the Oonai Ziggurat. The jungle extended steeply down to the valley-facing side of the road, allowing a look over the city at the foot of the mountain. While down in its alleys, the destruction had been visceral and horrifying, there was something almost surreal to it up here, with the fires and smoke columns rising from the white buildings and tinting the undersides of the ink-black clouds amber. Though the Jade District was the epicenter of the chaos, the destruction spread out all over the city, out into Uunil-Yâr's periphery where the workers and the Makehu lived. Nothing, Jespar realized, would ever be the same, not for the nobles, not for the workers, not for the men, the women, the children, the old. History had ended a chapter in bright, bloody letters, and no one knew what came next.

Down by the Second Ziggurat, the mob broke into another round of cheers. A deafening crash followed. Jespar barely heard it.

"Are you well?" Kawu said. "Do you need me to—?"

"I'm good. Let's move on."

The mob thinned out at its vanguard, and black uniforms gradually replaced the bright clothes of the workers until the crowd consisted almost exclusively of Scythes. Jespar and Kawu were forced to slow their pace in order to avoid suspicion. They had almost reached the front lines when Jespar gripped Kawu by the shoulder. He nodded up ahead. Kawu followed his eyes then turned back to Jespar with a slight frown.

"Is that…?"

"The Aeterna? Yeah," Jespar replied in a low voice. "That must be the 'White Brother.'"

As if to confirm his words, the towering figure in the front row thrust up a glaive held by a chalk-white hand and the mob's thousand throats again cried their chorus.

Jespar squinted ahead against the glare of the torches. "Can you see his sister?"

Kawu craned his neck then shook his head.

Jespar clenched and loosened his fists.

He was surprised when the mountain river came into sight, a wild, brutal current rushing down the steep mountainside. The din of the mob had almost completely drowned its rush and the roar of the waterfall that spawned it. The downpours of the past two days had drastically widened the riverbed, leaving behind a battlefield of uprooted trees and bushes, logs and branches spiraled through the stream like the debris of a shattered ship. Jespar and Kawu detached themselves from the throng as inconspicuously as they could and disappeared into the outer lines of the jungle that extended along the mountain side of the road.

They had barely caught their breath when Lysia emerged from behind a tree. "Stars burn me… What happened?"

They told her everything, and when Kawu came to Jespar's condition and what the refocusings did to him, Lysia's eyes grew heavy. "Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse."

"It'll be okay if we make it to the ziggurat," Jespar said.

"Easier said than done." Lysia tipped her chin toward the tip of the mountain. "Remember that clearing just beyond the bridge? The meadow?"

Jespar nodded.

"Well, if that investigator from Kaâra Manor was right, I'm fairly sure this is where that corrupt general and the Blue Guard have laid their trap. I saw a couple of guards sneaking through the jungle farther down. In other words: There's going to be a battle."

Jespar exhaled, massaging his nose with forefinger and thumb. "We could sneak around it."

"That's just what I was going to suggest. We can follow the mob until the clearing then slip off into the jungle, ditch the uniforms, and circle the meadow as fast as we can while

the mob and the guard bash each other's brains in. With a bit of luck, we can get a fair bit ahead of the curve this way."

Jespar considered. "Fair enough. Let's give it a try."

For some reason, the mob grew quieter the closer they got to the First Ziggurat. Though Jespar's head and his ringing ears welcomed the silence, there was nothing soothing about it. The uneasy, anticipatory calm was that of a predator who had cornered his prey and now moved in for the kill.

"Fucking poetic, isn't it?" A Scythe had fallen into step beside Jespar, no older than him or Lysia. He had a heavy Kiléan accent, so it took Jespar a moment to decipher his words. His heart beat faster.

"That's one word for it," Jespar said.

There had been a tremble in his voice, but the Scythe didn't seem to notice. "These leeches have no coinless idea what they're in for," he said. "Saaras'jodule, I'll enjoy this."

"So will I, Brother," Jespar said. "So will I."

Satisfied, the man flashed Jespar a grin, exposing a set of yellowed teeth. Then he slapped Jespar on the back and quickened his pace, disappearing in the front rows.

"What was that about?" Lysia said in a low voice.

"I don't know. And I'm not sure I want to."

The clouds had scattered when the clearing at last came into sight, allowing the gibbous moon to pour a silvery light onto the wide meadow. A breeze swayed the high grass that extended to either side of the road, transforming into a roiling sea of green, the paved stone of Fortune Road an unmoving arrow cutting through it.

The vanguard had stopped. All around Jespar, people craned their necks and stood on their toes to see what was going on. Lysia softly elbowed him in the side and cocked her head toward the jungle. Then she made a sharp turn right and disappeared into it. Jespar sought eye contact with Kawu, who gave a nod in answer. Both followed. It was only a few arm-lengths that lay between them and the boscage, but, with every step, Jespar's

back grew hotter, as if the entire mob stared after them. When the jungle at last enfolded him, he released a long breath. He glanced over his shoulder. No one had noticed.

Lysia wiped a layer of grime and sweat off her forehead. “Well then. Let’s do it.”

They skirted the clearing as quickly and as quietly as they could, keeping to the dense rows of trees, rocks, and bushes that bordered it. Mixed with the faint aroma of smoke, the forest air had a strange smell to it, sweet and pungent, fresh and rotten. Attracted by the warmth of their skin, mosquitoes and bloodbugs harried them, worrying at the last patches of unscathed skin ten days in the tropics had left Jespar.

About halfway around the clearing, Kawu refocused Jespar and this time Jespar noticed how the color drained from Kawu’s cheeks, how he slumped forward.

How what little glow was left in his eyes faded.

It’s killing him.

He swallowed hard as Kawu withdrew his hands, his fingers trembling.

“Thanks,” Jespar said into his collar. “I—” He stopped, not knowing how to finish.

Kawu smiled faintly. “I told you—it’s okay.”

“I think it’s safe to get out of these uniforms now,” Lysia said. “Come on.”

Freed from the sweat-drenched, black uniforms Jespar felt stones lighter. Stains of blood, presumably from its previous owner, had soaked from the uniform’s cloth into Jespar’s tunic, which stuck to his chest like a second skin. Lysia looked at the pile of clothes then absently shook her head.

They moved on. After a while, the vegetation had grown so dense it almost completely obscured the view onto the clearing. Animals hooted and chirped, leaves rustled, branches cracked. Whenever something moved in the shadows, Jespar’s throat grew a little tighter. When the walls of green at last thinned out and the moonlit meadow came back into sight, Jespar gave a long sigh.

It stuck in his throat.

“What’s wrong?” Lysia asked, sliding up beside him. “Are we—?”

She fell silent.

As they had moved around the clearing the mob had advanced halfway into it. Once again they had come to a stop.

An army faced them.

"The guard," Kawu whispered.

Lysia had been right after all. The clearing was the trap.

Everything that had happened—it was all still going according to plan. Despite the enormity of the mob and knowing how far it extended down Fortune Road, the sight of the garrison restored a touch of Jespar's hope. The guards numbered in the high hundreds, perhaps even in the thousands, standing side by side in perfect formation, many of them clad in nuvium armor. Those were soldiers, steel-forged, beaten, and sharpened by years and years of training. The insurgents? They were commoners. Violent, furious, and armed, but inexperienced in combat apart from the mercenaries of the Scythe, who, if Ganêrys was right, were in on the plan. Even from afar, it was clear that at least parts of the rioters had come to the same conclusion. Up front, the chanting had ceased completely, and a nervous motion had crept into the mass of bodies.

"What now?" Lysia asked. "Do we push on?"

Jespar mulled it over then shook his head. "Too risky. I bet my left hand the Blue Guard are watching their flanks, and chances are they might mistake us for insurgents if we try to slip past them now."

"Then what do we do?"

"I say we wait for the battle to start then use the confusion to sneak past undetected."

Lysia seemed skeptical at first, but then she muttered agreement. They each found themselves a spot in the bushes then sank to their haunches and observed the scene.

Two figures detached themselves from the groups. The White Brother and a guardswoman. A hand on her scimitar, the latter stopped a few steps from the Aeterna, whose body language betrayed not even a modicum of nervousness.

Sawahe, Jespar thought.

Soul-dead.

The guardswoman and the White Brother engaged in a discussion. Though Jespar had no idea what it was about, he noticed that the guardswoman's gestures grew increasingly agitated, whereas the Twin leaned casually on his glaive as if conversing with an old friend.

Of course he isn't nervous. Unlike the guardswoman, the Twin knew this was all a show. There'd be a brief skirmish, then the Blue Guard, through some tactical maneuver probably led by General Duul himself, would end the charade and quash the riot.

An explosion ripped through the night.

Eyes wide open, Jespar looked to Lysia, who was equally perplexed, then back to the clearing where the guardswoman had stopped talking and stared up the mountain. A moment passed before Jespar connected the dots.

Up the mountain.

The explosion had come from the First Ziggurat.

"Stars burn me," Lysia said.

Hell broke loose.

In a single, fluid motion, the Twin back-stepped and swung his glaive in a horizontal arc at the guardswoman. The strike took her head clean off, spraying a fountain of blood into the night air. Screams erupted from the rear lines of the guard garrison, as a wave of black bodies crashed into their sidelines.

Scythe.

Raising his glaive, the White Brother gave a battle cry then charged forward.

The mob followed.

The assault might have been the end of a lesser force, but, somehow, the Blue Guard managed to turn things around. Orders were shouted over the din of battle, and the soldiers assumed formation, their nuvium spears poised over their shields, facing the incoming horde. Even in the rear, where the two Scythe shock troops had cut two deep gashes into the Blue Guards' formation, the soldiers managed to draw together and close the gaps, then fought back with all their power. Scimitars clashed against shields, spears against armor, screams pierced the night air.

Kawu watched the battle with hollow eyes. “It… it doesn’t look like they’re winning.”

“They will,” Jespar said with a confidence he didn’t feel. “It’s all part of the plan.”

Lysia stood, wiping her palms against her trousers. “Whatever this is, we have to go. That bang before was a fire-spitter, meaning the Scythe is already at the ziggurat.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense! How did they get past the army?”

“Who cares? If we—”

“Saaras’jodule.”

Both Jespar and Lysia turned to Kawu, who stared wide-eyed into the sky. Jespar followed his gaze.

A monstrous black shape rose over the jungle from the opposite side of the meadow. While some of the combatants noticed, and even stopped their melee to turn and look, the others just battled on.

Jespar had seen and ridden myrads, but never one like this.

The creature that hovered over the treetops had the height of a house, the feathered wingspan of two. From a colossal, black-furred torso, a tail at least half the length of its body swung left and right over foliage that swayed with the beat of its wings. Four horns rose from its goat-like head, above two rows of eyes.

“Saaras’jodule,” Kawu repeated.

A rider perched atop the myrad at chest-height, holding on to the mane that ran along the length of its neck. It was too dark and too far away to recognize his face, but Jespar did recognize his uniform, covered in turquoise scales.

“Is that…?” Lysia whispered.

Jespar nodded. “I think that’s General Duul.”

The black myrad gave a shrieking roar and green mist sprayed from its mouth. Then it dived at the mob.

Chapter 19

Diplomacy

THERE WAS A DARK BEAUTY TO THE SIGHT: General Duul's black myrad, sweeping down from the sky like the judgment of a vengeful god. The soldiers held their formation, but the mob scattered and fled, people screaming and running off in all directions. The myrad held its nosedive, hoof-talons tucked to the underside of its massive torso, wings folded. First, Jespar thought it would tilt sharply up just before reaching the ground, then tear its talons through the panicking mob like scythes shearing through a wheat field. But halfway down, it opened its mouth—and Jespar remembered what it was that made black myrads both dreaded and sought-after in matters of war.

A yellow, glowing mist formed in the dark of its throat, and wisps formed at the corners of its mouth only to be torn away by the passing air.

Poison.

He'd seen it before, during the war in Nehrim. Just before the myrad crashed into the mob, General Duul would yank up the reins so the creature would sweep right across the heads of the crowd. Simultaneously, it would open its mouth and spew that mixture of saliva and that toxic, hot steam only a black myrad's lungs were capable of forming.

It would suffocate them.

Once the mist came in contact with the insurgents, it would enter them through the pores of their skin and paralyze every muscle, lungs and heart included. It was a slow and painful death, and that the poison affected the muscles controlling the vocal cords as well made it only more terrifying—an entire squadron of soldiers, reduced to silently convulsing puppets, the only indicator of their pain being their gaping mouths and widened eyes.

Jespar averted his eyes. “We should—”

A wailing scream pulled his attention back to the battlefield. The myrad swept over the mob, but no mist came from its mouth. Instead, its wings were beating erratically while its talons clawed at the air as if desperately looking for something onto which it could hold. General Duul tore at the reins, but the myrad just kept on screaming and wheeling through the air until it jerked up into a steep ascent, throwing Duul back in his saddle such that he jutted out almost horizontally from the myrad like an extended neckbone. His boots in the stirrups and his hands clutching at the mane were all that kept him from falling. Up and up the myrad went, until it was just a black silhouette over the moon. Spasms shook its body, and its wailing echoed across the meadow.

The wings stopped beating. And the myrad fell.

It dropped from the sky, the general a flailing, screaming stick figure in the saddle. It crashed right onto the right flank of the mob, one thousand pounds squashing the rioters like a boulder dropping onto an ant colony.

Time stood still. Some of the rioters and guards still fought, but most were frozen, staring at the giant heap of flesh and feathers and blood that lay on the flattened grass. A man, the lower half of his body pinned under the corpse, screamed and clawed at the grass trying to pull himself out.

There was no trace of General Duul.

“Stars burn me,” Lysia whispered. “What… what was *that*?”

Jespar started to speak, then broke off as he noticed something.

“The fur,” he said.

“What?”

Jespar nodded at the massive corpse. On the meadow, the fighting slowly resumed as the combatants awoke from their stupor.

“It’s gray. The myrad’s fur is gray.”

And that wasn’t all—not only had the myrad’s fur changed its color from sable to silver, its anatomy also appeared to have changed. It was thinner, its once powerful, long

neck a brittle rope, its wing bones and spine jutting out sharply from under fur and feathers. Weak. Frail.

Old.

Something bright and green shot across the battlefield. It crashed into the right flank of the Blue Guard, detonating in a blinding explosion of sparks and smoke. Jespar shut his eyes, flashes dancing across the black of his eyelids. When he looked again, the green smoke had cleared enough to see what remained—or hadn't—of the guards who'd been caught in the impact.

Nothing was left but bones. In its periphery, men and women screamed and shook and crawled, some of them missing limbs and bleeding profusely. The soldiers around the impact who weren't fighting took turns staring at their wounded comrades, the myrad's corpse, and behind or ahead of them where the insurgents once again hacked away at the front and rear of the phalanx like frenzied animals.

Gods.

Jespar traced the trajectory of the projectile, ending at a group of Scythes in front of the tree line on the opposite side of the clearing. A woman a good head taller than her comrades stood between them, her ivory skin and hair contrasting the black of her uniform. She had a staff in her right hand, its tip shimmering green, pointed at the impact site of the fireball. *The White Sister*. The very same he'd fought at the ambush on Enkshi's escort.

A second, sparkling green sphere manifested at the tip of her staff, floating in midair for several seconds like a demonic sun. Then, it shot off, cutting through the air at breakneck speed. It hit the Blue Guard's phalanx right in the gash its predecessor had torn into the formation. Though the explosion was smaller than the one before, its effect was no less devastating. Guards wailed. Bodies spun through the air.

"They're killing them," Kawu said. "They're going to kill them all."

Jespar looked at the White Sister a heartbeat longer. A new sphere manifested before her. The phalanx slowly buckled under the assault of the mob, and though the front row still held, Jespar knew it was only a matter of time before morale or the first shield broke.

He stood. “We need to go. Now.”

They didn’t speak as they skirted the last bit of the clearing, going as deep into the jungle as they could without getting lost. Even there, the slaughter on the meadow was audible, like the echo of a nightmare refusing to fade. When they finally reached the opposite of the clearing where Fortune Road meandered up the last fifth of the mountain, they turned sharply north, following along the road’s course through the underwood. Now and then, they heard fighting from the road to their left, but the dense jungle made it impossible to see what was going on. It also obscured the view to the peak where the First Ziggurat rested, but the absence of fires or smoke in the sky suggested its walls hadn’t been breached.

Yet.

Lysia fell into step beside Jespar. “What on Vyn happened there?”

“The other twin killed the myrad, that’s what happened. She drained—”

“—the life out of it, I know,” Lysia said. “That’s not what I meant. That battle wasn’t supposed to happen like that—the Blue Guard should have defeated the rioters and not the other way around. Not to mention that the Scythe is apparently already at Oonai’s doorstep.”

Jespar ducked his head under a net of low-hanging branches. The forest detritus cracked and rustled softly under his boots. “Ganêrys was only guessing about that part of the plan. Maybe she was wrong.”

“But right about everything else? Everything happened exactly as she said it would—the riot, the destruction of the ziggurats, the trap by General Duul.”

Jespar exhaled heavily. “What do you want me to say? I have no idea what this means, not in the slightest. Perhaps, there’s a layer to the plan we haven’t understood yet.”

Behind them, Kawu said, “Or the Scythe betrayed it.”

Both looked at him.

“Think about it: They knew what was supposed to happen, but simply didn’t abide by it. Instead of letting the guards defeat the mob, they snuck two units behind its lines to fall into the flanks once that battle starts, and probably another one ahead to attack the

First Ziggurat when nobody expects it. And, instead of letting General Duul devastate the mob on his myrad, they anticipated its appearance and used the White Sister's magic to kill it."

Lysia hesitated. "But what do they gain from this? The Scythe are mercenaries, not actual rebels."

"Maybe that's just what they wanted Oonai and Vel'Nyx to think," Jespar said. "They wanted an actual revolution all along and used the two as dray horses."

"I don't think they're after power," Kawu said. "Remember what I told you on the way to Mount Kaâra? They are *sawahe,* so their minds are different from ours."

Lysia raised her eyebrows. "Meaning?"

"Meaning I believe they simply relish the chaos, as strange as it sounds. They did this to provoke the maximum amount of violence."

Lysia frowned, then let out a long breath. "Well, whatever the reason, the question is, how are we going to get into the ziggurat if the mob is already at the gate?"

Jespar stepped over a storm-felled tree blocking the path. "We'll figure it out when we get there."

A few minutes later, they reached a river. Beyond it, Fortune Road began its final, steep ascent to the mountain's peak, upon which the First Ziggurat was now clearly visible, white as the moon illuminating it. Dots of light moved up the road and clustered around the ziggurat: torches.

Jespar exhaled heavily as fatigue crept into his bones. He looked down the river for a crossing and got lucky. Not far from him was a shallow point where stones jutted through the surface, broad and flat enough to serve as a bridge. They crossed balancing across the wet stone, then began climbing the final slope that lay between them and the ziggurat, a task that drained what little strength they had left. As they had to avoid Fortune Road, the rough terrain often required them to stop or look for alternate routes when rock walls or dense vegetation made it impossible to continue, costing them valuable time. By now, the battle noises from below had faded.

When they, at last, reached the crest of the peak, and the trees opened up onto the plateau upon which the ziggurat was built, Jespar's heart sank. He had hoped for perhaps a small division of Scythes in front of Oonai's palace. Instead, there were hundreds, lined up before the tall, white walls, chanting, "The dream is rotten," while rhythmically striking their pitchforks and staffs first into the ground, then into the air. More of them poured onto the meadow from Fortune Road every minute. *And that's just the vanguard*, Jespar thought. Before long, the real mob would catch up, the mob that had just slaughtered almost the entire Blue Guard, and that numbered well into the thousands. Of course, Oonai's ziggurat had the highest and thickest walls of the seven, but even they shrunk to insignificance in the face of five thousand furious commoners, a trained terrorist unit with siege weaponry, and most importantly, no one to help them.

Guards manned the battlements, holding arbalests and bows, but they didn't fire.

Jespar and the others sank to their knees behind a man-sized bush with red flowers blooming between fat green leaves, and studied the meadow through the thicket.

"Why aren't they attacking?" Lysia asked.

Jespar rubbed his right temple with the heel of his palm. Now that they had stopped walking, he felt the weight of exhaustion bearing down on him, and had to fight to keep his eyes open. "They're probably waiting for something."

"Well, no way we're getting in through the front door."

"Mm-hm." Jespar squinted.

Wisps of smoke hung near the gate, presumably from when they had tried to blow it up. Jespar let his eyes wander along the walls of the ziggurat. Judging from what he'd seen inside and what he saw now, they encircled the entire ziggurat and a good five hundred acres around it. The backside lined up with a jagged cliff. Jespar cursed, wishing Agaam were still with them. There was almost certainly some kind of secret escape tunnel they could have used as a way in, but without the old servant to help, they might as well have tried to find the sole source of water in a desert continent.

Kawu touched his shoulder. "It's time."

It's killing him.

"I can hold out a little longer."

"Jespar. Please."

Jespar bit his lip. When the refocusing was done, Kawu's lips had taken on a blueish tint and his cheeks had gone even thinner. He closed his eyes and took two deep breaths.

Lysia, who had watched the process with that same, cryptic expression as before turned to look at the ziggurat. She waved them over. "Look. Something is happening."

A group of Scythes had appeared where Fortune Road emptied into the meadow. Jespar recognized them at once: the White Twins.

Heads turned and the chanting ceased. The crowd parted, clearing a way for them to pass. With no hurry, the Twins crossed the plateau, stopping some twenty arm-lengths before the gate. The guards on the battlements looked at each other in confusion, but did nothing else.

Lysia narrowed her eyes. "What are they doing?"

Before Jespar could answer, the White Sister raised her hand and the crowd behind her scattered, clearing the view onto a solitary figure kneeling on the gravel of Fortune Road.

"Gods," Kawu said, "is that…?"

Jespar lowered his eyes. "Yes."

The woman would have been too far away to recognize had it not been for the jewelry woven into her hair that faintly reflected the moonlight.

Nayima Oonai.

Somehow, the Scythe had gotten their hands on the Mistress of the Ziggurat. Ma'saa Oonai didn't struggle or move; she simply knelt there, staring at the ground. The White Sister studied her, then nodded. Except for the noises from farther down the mountain it was now once again quiet enough to hear the mountain wind and the cicadas.

Lysia cursed under her breath. "How the hell did they get their hands on her?"

"I don't know," Jespar said. "But I have an idea what they're about to do."

"There has to be some way we can help her," Lysia said, but her eyes lacked the conviction her words suggested. Of course, there wasn't. They were just three, whereas

the insurgents numbered in the hundreds, not counting the thousands that were still on their way up the road.

Will you help me pass this trial?

As the Gods intended you to?

Jespar's eyes stung. He pressed them shut.

Well done.

Help someone? He couldn't even help himself.

He opened his eyes. "I don't think there is."

Lysia held his gaze, her lips trembling. "This isn't fair. This just isn't fair."

Jespar had no answer. What was there to say? Out of everyone wound up in this web of lies, secrets, and intrigue, Nayima Oonai bore the least blame. Her crime? Ignorance. She hadn't wanted to see the crimes her husband had committed, because acknowledging them would have meant acknowledging she was partly responsible. Only the mob, of course, didn't care about that. To them, Nayima Oonai epitomized all they hated.

The White Sister approached Ma'saa Oonai and sank to her haunches before her. She touched Ma'saa Oonai's shoulder. Like a string puppet brought to life by the hands of her master, Ma'saa Oonai began to float.

Surrounded by a pale green shimmer, her naked feet lifted off the ground as she gently rose into the air, revealing her blood-smeared face and purple robes. She didn't move, didn't struggle, her eyes were closed and her chin rested in the pit of her neck.

The White Sister rose, her legs buckling slightly when she stood. A Scythe rushed to her but she slapped his hand away.

Up and up Ma'saa Oonai rose, until her ascent at last came to a halt when she was in line with the parapet above the gate of the ziggurat. The guards stirred, cast each other helpless glances, but no one moved.

"What… what is she doing?" Kawu asked. His voice was faint, as if he struggled to stay awake.

"I think she's trying to negotiate," Jespar said. "They know they can take the ziggurat by brute force, but they've won already so they might as well save themselves the losses."

"Huh." Kawu rubbed his eyes then turned this attention back to the scene unfolding at the gate.

Jespar's guess proved right when the White Brother stepped forward. The guards raised and nocked their bows, but he didn't flinch. Less than fifteen arm-lengths from the portcullis that preceded the scarab-ornamented gate, he stopped and thrust the hilt of his glaive into the ground. There was blood in his hair and on his face.

"Oonai!"

His voice was powerful and clear, the breeze carrying it across the entire meadow. The Scythes cheered, but the twin jerked up a hand and they fell silent.

"Jaaros Ismiraael Oonai!"

Nothing.

"Are you such a coward?"

Silence. The twin glanced at his sister. She nodded.

The glimmer around Ma'saa Oonai grew brighter. Even before she started convulsing, Jespar knew what was going to happen. Her body slowly began to change. Her limbs grew longer. Her back shrunk. Her black hair faded. Trapped in her stupor, she didn't react at first, but when her eyes flung open, she let out what must have been the most horrific scream Jespar had ever heard. She struggled, tossed her body left and right, but it was pointless. Both the guards and the mob watched the morbid spectacle in silence.

"Stop!"

The light faded back into a glimmer, and with it the transformation and the convulsions ceased. Ma'saa Oonai continued to scream, then fell to a wailing sob. She kept on struggling, but there was no more strength to her movements. Two people pushed through the row of guards above the gate: a man and a woman. The woman had short-cropped black hair and broad shoulders, the man had skin black as onyx and a limp in his gait.

Mâadira and Enkshi.

Enkshi walked up to the parapet, clawing his hands into the stone. “You fucking monsters! We’ll flay you alive for this. I swear it! We’ll flay you alive and send your skins to your coinless mothers!”

Though the hatred in Enkshi’s voice sent cold down Jespar’s spine, the tremble in his voice gave his threat a hysteric note.

If it had intimidated the White Brother in the least, he didn’t show it. “I asked for the master, not for his pet!” he shouted back. “Send us Oonai!”

By now the mob poured onto the meadow by the dozens, filling the night with the glow of torches and the gleam of weapons.

“You’re not worthy of my master’s attention! None of you!”

There was a short pause. Then the White Brother broke into laughter, and the mob did so with him. Enkshi shouted something, but the crowd drowned it out completely. Mâadira put a hand on his shoulder but he didn’t move. The laughing turned into chanting, until the entire meadow resonated with the booming chorus.

“The dream is rotten!”

“The dream is rotten!”

“The dream is rotten!”

“I really hope he has a plan,” Lysia said. “Because whatever he’s trying, it’s not working.”

Jespar clenched his fists. At last, the chanting died down.

“So the rumors are true, aren’t they?” the White Brother shouted. “Something happened to Oonai.”

Enkshi said nothing.

“He’s ill, isn’t he? Or dead?”

“He’s alive and well.”

The twin snorted. “Well, what does it matter? We will look for ourselves once we’re inside. But fair enough—if you’re all we’re getting, then we’ll make do, Counselor Zagash Enkshi. In some ways, I admire you, you know? A Qyranian and a cripple. And

despite all the times the leeches told you that you were just a useless, stinking coal-man, you didn't turn your back on them. No… instead you groveled before them, sucked up the saliva they spit on you, and lied and flattered your way to the top until you became a leech yourself. Though you're still not really at the top, are you? You're still just a pet."

Enkshi replied, but it was too quiet for Jespar to hear.

The twin laughed. "If you say so, Zagash Enkshi. If you say so. But enough of the banter, here's the deal: You open the gates for us and we spare you, Ma'saa Oonai, and your soldiers their horrible fate. The First Magnate dies, but you get to live. Keep them closed and we'll make her rot away right in front of everyone's eyes and then take the ziggurat by force. It's over either way…. but you get to choose the blood price."

There was a long silence. Mâadira leaned into on Enkshi and whispered something in his ear.

"How do I know you'll hold your end of the bargain?" Enkshi asked.

"Frankly? You don't. But it's either take the chance or certain death for all of you."

Enkshi stared at the twin, then at his sister, the dark hues of the counselor's skin melting with those of his blue robes and the night sky behind him. Ma'saa Oonai raised her head and said something. Enkshi's eyes widened, while the White Brother gave another laugh. "How very noble of you."

Enkshi shook his head and said something to Ma'saa Oonai.

"You're testing our patience," the White Brother said. "Cara?"

His sister nodded. The light flared up again, this time brighter and flickering, like green lightning. Ma'saa Oonai let out an ululating scream and arched her back, her face contorting in agony. Even from afar, Jespar could see the wrinkles growing deeper, her skull bones sharper. Strands of salt and pepper hair fell from her forehead and floated down on the meadow like the seeds of black and white dandelions.

"Enough!"

The White Sister held her spell a moment longer before the light faded once again and the transformation stopped. Ma'saa Oonai's screams ceased, and this time her body went slack, her head lolling against her chin, her mouth agape. The first occurrence of the spell

had aged her perhaps only a decade, but she was now a crone, her flowing skirt hanging limply from her frail body. Her once dark hair was now gray and white, her scalp shining through the wispy strands. Hundreds of wrinkles creased her face like ravines. Though most of the insurgents seemed pleased at the sight, some stirred and talked uneasily.

"You win," Enkshi said. The hatred was gone from his voice, replaced by resignation. "You coinless, pathetic monsters. You win."

A short silence.

"Very wise," the White Brother said.

Enkshi pointed at him with a shaking finger. "You'll pay for this, trust me. One day, you'll pay for this."

"How self-righteous of the man whose decisions and decrees caused the death of hundreds over the years. Sad to be on the receiving end of your actions for a change, isn't it?"

Approval roared from the mob.

The White Sister stepped forward. "Open the gate and we'll let her down. You have my promise."

Enkshi barked a laugh. "Forget it. You let her down first and bring her to the gate, then we'll open it."

The White Brother glanced at his sister, as if asking for permission.

"…Fine," she said.

Slowly, Ma'saa Oonai's withered body floated back to the ground. When her feet touched the gravel of Fortune Road, the green shimmer disappeared and she collapsed like a sack wet by rainfall. The White Sister nodded to a nearby Scythe who rushed to Ma'saa Oonai's slumped body and hoisted her over his shoulders. Then he slowly began to cross to the gate. No one spoke—it was as if the entire peak of the mountain held its breath. A few steps from the portcullis, he dropped her to the ground then disappeared back into the mob.

"Good," the White Brother said. His hand clutched the pole of his glaive. "Your turn."

After the briefest of pauses, Enkshi gave a signal to Mâadira.

The White Brother smiled.

Behind the walls cranks could be heard turning. Slowly, the portcullis rose. Lysia shook her head in disbelief. “What the hell are they doing? What the *hell* are they doing?”

The portcullis was now all the way up, and the gate hinges creaked as the two wings of the door slowly parted inward. Someone in the back of the mob raised his sword and thrust it in the air with a triumphant cheer. Others followed his example, until the entire throng was back to its chanting.

The White Sister stepped next to her brother, their faces now obscured by the incensed crowd.

It was over.

Out of friendship for Ma’saa Oonai or the irrational hope that somehow, the White Twins would actually hold their promise and spare them, Counselor Enkshi had opened the First Ziggurat’s gates to the insurgency. Plan Overgrowth had failed. The revolution was over.

The Coalition had fallen.

Chapter 20

Snow

JESPAR REALIZED ENKSHI HAD A PLAN when the gate was halfway open, and a grin split his face. Having arrived at the same conclusion, the twin spun around and dashed for his sister. Enkshi slammed his palm on the parapet.

"Now!"

At once, both wings of the gate swung open and exposed the mouth of what looked like a giant brass cylinder. It extended well into the courtyard, resting on an equally colossal six-wheeled contraption, like the frame of a battering ram. Jespar didn't understand what he was looking at until he noticed the amber glow growing in the tube.

Fire erupted from its mouth.

A man-high jet of flames roared through the air mere arm-lengths above Ma'saa Oonai's unconscious body and headed straight at the White Brother. It hit him in the back, engulfing him in a lurid blaze, then blasted on and through the mob. The White Sister, who stood just at the outer edge of the jet, raised her staff into the air. Then the fire consumed her.

A horn sounded.

The guards raised their bows and arbalests, nocked, aimed, loosed. A hail of arrows rained down on the chaos, felling the insurgents, already aflame and fleeing, by the dozens. More guards swarmed out of the jungle west of the gate, their nuvium armor and shields reflecting the moonlight and the flames of the fire jet.

This is it.

Jespar jumped to his feet, screamed, "Run!" and ran with all the strength left in his muscles, with all the breath his lungs could muster, with all the panic that came with knowing what would happen if he didn't make it. He didn't dare turn around—he just

kept on, sending a prayer to chance that Lysia and Kawu were following him. Less than fifty arm-lengths lay between him and the gate, but they spread into eternity, as if the earth under his feet was moving backward while he sprinted ahead. About halfway, the heat of the ongoing fire stream truly hit him. It cut off his breath, slowed him down, cost valuable seconds. Lysia caught up with him, squinting against the heat and the glare, sweat pouring down her soot-stained face. Jespar bit his lip and ran faster.

They had almost reached the gate when the stream of fire ceased so suddenly Jespar stopped mid-step. With the roar of the flames gone, only the clashing of blades, the whir of arrows, and the wails and moans of the wounded and dying prevailed. The stench of burnt flesh, scorched grass, and singed hair filled the air, bringing bile into Jespar's throat. Two soldiers came sprinting out of the ziggurat and hastily dragged Ma'saa Oonai into the courtyard.

Kawu appeared beside Jespar, his breath shallow. The ground in the fire's trajectory was scorched, leaving behind patches of charred earth or burning grass, billows of smoke dancing up into the air. Those who'd been caught in the jet's blast had been reduced to smoldering black sculptures, hunkering down on the ground, limbs outstretched or curled into a ball. A solitary figure knelt some steps from the gate, his back facing the siege machine. The White Brother. He was a mummy like the others, the clothes burnt off his body, his face turned into an unrecognizable mask. Only his teeth were strangely unscathed, twisted in what had probably been a scream but looked like a grin. His glaive lay beside him, the pole aflame.

Ironically, those who'd been on the fringes of the fire were worse off. Only parts of their bodies had been caught in the flames, having turned them into human torches. There was an animal quality to the shrieks and howls and cries they gave as they ran, flailed, and tossed themselves about in their futile effort to quench the flame, some of them running right into the spears and scimitars of the guard unit that harried the throng's flank. Jespar looked at Kawu, who watched the scene without moving a muscle.

He's never going to forget that, he thought.

Then: *Neither will you.*

"No!"

Lysia. She was already at the gate, facing a row of armored guards who had formed a phalanx in front of the fire-breather, spears poised over their shields. They weren't stabbing at Lysia, but their faces made it clear they would if she came any closer.

"We're with the counselor! Dammit, we're with the counselor!"

Behind the guards, a lanky woman with bright red hair hurried about on the back of the siege machine's cylinder, pulling levers while two guards poured liquid from a barrel into what must have been an opening on the rear of the machine.

Jespar took Kawu's hand and caught up to Lysia. Before he had a chance to do anything, a small green sphere shot over their heads, missing Jespar by only finger-lengths. The red-haired woman—*a Starling, she's a Starling*—looked up then, as she realized what was about to happen, attempted to duck. The sphere hit her right between the eyes, exploded, blasted off her head, and threw her body back along the cylinder.

Jespar spun around, looking for the origin of the sphere. Behind them, in the trail of charred earth, stood the White Sister, eyes narrowed and her lips pressed together. She was unscathed by fire save for her outstretched right hand, which was black and as shriveled as a mummy's claw.

Ahead, the guards still held their formation, but two on the right had their spears down, staring at the decapitated corpse of the Starling engineer on the fire-breather.

"Quick!" Jespar shouted. Before reason could stop instinct, he crossed to the rightmost guard and threw his entire weight into the man's shield. Pain exploded in Jespar's shoulder. He stumbled. The guard reeled back then fell over. The soldier to his left half turned and pointed his spear at Jespar.

Another sphere shot over their heads. It was only a second, but it distracted the soldier enough for Jespar to leap over his comrade and dash into the courtyard. He made it as far as the palm-lined avenue leading to the ziggurat before a trio of guards came running at him with scimitars drawn. He stopped short, desperately looking for an escape route. To the left, the white ziggurat wall rose behind the meticulously symmetrical line of palm

trees. Another division of guards approached him from the right. Lysia and Kawu stood behind him, their eyes darting about the courtyard.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!

He fell to his knees, hands raised.

"We're with the counselor! Godsdammit, we're on your side!"

Why it worked this time, Jespar couldn't say. Perhaps, because by getting through the gate, they had crossed the symbolic line between friend and foe, or maybe because he'd once again just had one hell of a lot of luck.

One of the three guards facing him stepped forward with his weapon drawn, but another raised his hand. "Who are you?"

"I told you, we're with—"

A familiar voice cut through the courtyard. Mâadira. "Close the gate! Close the fucking *gate*!"

The guard looked up at the battlement behind Jespar. His eyes widened. The cranks sounded again, followed by the screeching of the dropping portcullis and the bang of the gate falling shut.

It was as if the gate had closed the only pathway into another world. Outside, the roar of battle went on, but it now seemed unreal, dampened. A breeze blew up, rustling the palm fronds, the ilex trees, and the rhododendrons adorning the avenue. The alabaster pyramid of the ziggurat stood still in the night sky, a white haven that no war, no violence, no terror could ever blemish—or so it seemed.

"We're on your side," Jespar said under his breath.

No one answered. The guards all stared at something behind Jespar.

Slowly, he looked. A body lay chest-up on the fire-breather, its flesh smoldering, legs twisted in an unnatural angle—legs made from metal.

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Flames danced on the logs. It was an odd sight. A crackling hearth in the tropics, where the weather always felt like a wet, warm cloth around one's head. The fire danced and danced, and inside its blazing hues of orange and red, shapes began to form.

Insects.

Faces.

People, tossing and turning and screaming as if—

"You okay?"

Lysia stood beside him, a cup of wine in her outstretched hand. Jespar looked at it, hesitating. Then, he took it and emptied it in one, long draw. If the wine was good, he didn't taste it, but he welcomed the heaviness it spread in his guts and limbs.

He glanced at Kawu, who sat on a bench on the opposite side of the room, but Kawu didn't notice. He'd been like that ever since the guards escorted them into the study and instructed them to wait. When Jespar attempted to comfort him after the last refocusing several minutes ago, Kawu gave only brief answers then asked for space.

Lysia looked at Jespar's emptied cup. "That wasn't the idea, you know."

"Write that on my epitaph," Jespar said.

Sighing, Lysia dropped down onto the chair beside him and drank. "You haven't answered my question, Jespar. Are you okay?"

Jespar shrugged. "Kawu just refocused me. That should last us for a while."

Lysia took another sip, swishing the wine around her mouth for a while before she swallowed. "We can do this. We're here now, we're going to find Vel'Nyx, and we'll make her release the bug. We will."

Dreadfully optimistic.

"Yeah," Jespar said, "we will."

They sat like this for a while, quietly watching the flames. In the study, the silence was even more complete. The plants and the thick walls blocked out all the noise from the siege literally taking place at their doorstep.

At last, the door opened and revealed Sergeant Mâadira's imposing figure. She looked no better than Kawu, with deep shadows under her eyes, her bristly hair greasy and

disheveled, and her face stained with soot. There was what looked like a burn mark on her right cheek, only the wound had a pale green glow to it. Mâadira motioned for them to move to the round table in the middle of the room, the one where Nayima Oonai and Counselor Enkshi had told them of the First Magnate's coma, ten days ago.

They sat.

Sergeant Mâadira closed her eyes and pressed the heels of her gloved palms against them. Then she nodded as if giving herself permission to speak.

"Sorry for letting you wait. We had to plan our defenses."

"How's it looking?" Jespar asked. "Can you keep them out?"

"For a while, I think—as long as our archers keep them from bringing their siege weapons into position, we should be good. But…"

She didn't finish the sentence.

"It's a matter of time," Lysia said.

"I'm afraid so. A couple of hours—the night at most. They are in the thousands, we're around four hundred, and that's counting the servants who've never fired a bow in their lives."

When there was no answer to this, Mâadira continued, "Ma'saa Oonai is with the medici, and they say her condition is stable."

"Will she recover?" Jespar asked.

Mâadira hesitated, that telltale pause of someone weighing lie against truth. "Probably not," she said. "But she'll live. What she needs now is to rest."

"And Enkshi?"

Mâadira lowered her eyes. "Morala guide his soul."

There was a long pause. Then, Mâadira looked up, and resolve had replaced the sorrow in her face. "Now, tell me what you found out. You told the guards you'd like to perform another of these," waving her hand as she did it, "rituals on Ma'sao Oonai?"

"Not on him," Jespar said, "on Third Magnate Vel'Nyx."

Mâadira blinked. "I don't understand."

They told their story, truthful except for one crucial element: Oonai.

In their version, Vel'Nyx and Duul were the sole minds behind the Overgrowth Plan, and Vel'Nyx had infected Oonai with the dream-eater in Kaâra Manor when she'd met him there under the pretense of discussing business.

When Jespar first suggested this version of the story, Lysia was furious, but at last his arguments had swayed her. There was simply no way of knowing how Mâadira would react to the revelation that her master had been dabbling in the art of mass murder and high treason himself. Should she simply not believe them—the most likely scenario, in Jespar's mind—she might not let them perform the ritual or might even have them incarcerated for slandering the First Magnate. Should she believe them, the sheer scale of Oonai's betrayal might prompt her into performing the punishment herself.

When they were done with their story, Mâadira's eyes rested on her folded hands on the table. After a while, she said, "She was taking a walk. Just like her husband always did."

"Ma'saa Oonai?" Jespar asked.

Mâadira nodded. "She left this morning, before the riot started… Ma'sao Oonai's health deteriorated rapidly after you left and she 'needed some time to think.'"

"Without guards?"

"Just two—as I said, she wanted privacy. I had a bad feeling about this, but the area around the ziggurats is usually well-protected and the ma'saa insisted, so I thought it would be all right. We never expected anything to happen before the Rain Festival."

"But it did," Lysia said.

"Yuz. As soon as we got word of the unrest in the Stone District, I sent out mounted scouts to look for her, but all they found were the corpses of her escort by the small waterfall about a mile from here. That's when we knew it was bad."

Jespar said, "They planned this."

There was a long silence. Then Mâadira let out a long breath. "It was my fault. I should have never allowed her to leave the ziggurat with such a small escort, not with all that's been going on. If I hadn't, these coinless bastards would have never gotten their hands on the ma'saa, and maybe even Enkshi might still be alive."

"The mob would still be at our doorsteps," Lysia said.

"No, but the ma'saa and Counselor Enkshi would still be around to make the decisions."

Mâadira bit her lip. "Enkshi, Agaam, the ma'saa… Saaras'jodule, how did we get here? This is a catastrophe. It's a godsforsaken catastrophe."

"Speaking of the Gods," Lysia said, "any news from the Order? Enkshi said they'd send a division for the Rain Festival."

"The keepers are on the way, but they won't arrive here before the end of next week. Also, if what you said about what happened to Duul and his troops on the clearing is true, this division would be up against the entire Scythe." Sensing the unspoken question in her words, Jespar shook his head. "I don't think there are survivors from the clearing. The mob outnumbered them."

Mâadira's nostrils twitched. Drawing a deep breath, she ran a hand through her hair. "And you're certain Duul was involved in this? I've known him for years, and I just… I can't believe he'd do this."

"That investigator was certain of it," Lysia said. "But, with all due respect, Ma'saa, we should waste no time pondering questions we won't find an answer to now. We need to perform the ritual and find Vel'Nyx." She shot Jespar a glance—purposefully or unintentionally, he didn't know. "It's the only way to save Oonai."

A moment passed in silence. Then Mâadira shook her head. "No."

"… No?"

"It's too much of a risk. We need to evacuate Ma'saa and Ma'sao Oonai from the ziggurat, and we need to do so now—as I told you, it'll only be a matter of hours before that madwoman and her crazed army of have-nots break through the gate somehow. We need to be long gone by then." She absently traced the line of her jaw with a gloved finger. "There's a tunnel that will lead us to an alcove in the northwest of Uunil, and we can use a boat to escape from there. The riots are all over the islands, but Kiia is still safe. I already sent two soldiers to scout ahead and make sure the alcove is secure."

Silence stretched out between them. Arguments raced through Jespar's head, ways of persuading her, but none seemed too convincing, even should he choose to reveal the most crucial bit of information: that without the ritual Jespar would die. What was a sellsword's life against that of the richest man in Kilé, his wife, and the future of the country?

"We can do both," Kawu said. "You evacuate the ziggurat and we travel into Vel'Nyx's dream."

Mâadira snorted. "Didn't you say earlier it'd take days to find Vel'Nyx's *tawua*?"

"*Tuewa*. And yes, I said that, but it's irrelevant. Time in dreams is different than time in reality. Even if we spend an entire week in the In-Between looking, it will only be a matter of minutes in this world."

Mâadira raised an eyebrow. "How is that possible?"

"Because dreams exist only in our minds. Didn't five minutes ever feel like an hour to you, or an hour like five minutes? In our minds, time is entirely relative. Regardless of how long it would take *us,* for you we'd only be gone for thirty minutes. Perhaps even less."

When even that didn't seem to sway her, Jespar leaned forward. "Look, Sergeant, I'm not from here, and I don't know much about politics. But if anything can be said about Jaaros Oonai, it's that he's cunning. Wouldn't you agree?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Only that there might still be a way to turn the table and stop this revolution and perhaps even save the city. I don't claim to know how, but I believe there's one in this palace who does. All we need to do is get him to talk."

Mâadira sighed, rubbing her temples. "All right."

Jespar let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Yes?"

"Yuz. Do what you have to do, and do it right now. We'll prepare everything for the evacuation in the meantime and make sure the soldiers keep the mob out as long as we can." She stood. "Why are you still here?"

***

In Oonai's sleeping chamber, Kawu brewed them both a cup of *znah* tea using the few leaves they had left. Two guards were with them. While one looked mostly scared, glancing out the window every other second, the other one watched them alertly, as if expecting them to suddenly start looting the place.

Wearily, Jespar set the cup to the ground. Just like when they had first entered Oonai's mind, they sat on an array of blankets before Oonai's bed.

"And now?" Jespar asked.

"Now we wait for the *znah* to take effect."

Jespar looked around. Lysia was studying the horned crown in Kawu's lap, and Kawu's eyes faced in Jespar's direction but it didn't feel as though he saw him. Despite the refocusing, Jespar felt light-headed, and there was something unreal about his surroundings, as if what he saw was just the reflection of a faraway mirror. He tried to imagine how Jaaros Oonai would feel if—*when*—he woke up.

His closest friend dead. His country in ruin. His wife mortally wounded and turned into a crone at the hands of a monster he had helped create. A month ago, Jaaros Oonai would have woken up to a life most people could only dream of. Now, he'd exchange one nightmare for another.

Kawu straightened his back and placed both hands on the dome of the crown. "I think we're ready. You remember the rule?

"Don't break the narrative," Lysia said. "We always have to act as if we're part of the dream."

"And thus manipulate Vel'Nyx into releasing the dream-eater, yuz."

Slowly, Jespar felt the brew take effect. His lids grew heavy.

Kawu quietly said something in Makehu. Then he spread his fingers between the horns of the crown and gently ran his palms up and down the solid gold, as if to memorize its texture.

The world went dark.

***

Like when Kawu had first guided them through the In-Between, the droga blurred the sensation of time as they floated through the dark ocean. Rationally, he knew it was the very same water he'd been in just hours ago, as the Corpse had almost pulled him into the dream-eater's nightmare, but thanks to the *znah,* he felt no fear. Like children floating in a warm summer sea, they let Kawu, who held the crown in his outstretched hands like a divining rod, guide them. On and on, deeper and deeper through the water that separated the waking and the dreaming, on and on through that place where the sands of time didn't pour through the neck of the hourglass but danced and swirled all through its body like flakes in a snow globe. How long it took them to find Vel'Nyx's *tuewa,* only Kawu could say—to Jespar, it could have been hours, days, or weeks. All he knew was that, at one vanishing point in time, the shape of a colossal sphere emerged in the darkness—and that Kawu led them in.

***

Cold, Jespar thought. It was cold.

And bright.

He closed his eyes to let them adjust. A tear trickled down his right cheek. Then he slowly opened his lids.

He was at the foot of a mountain. An endless expanse of white stretched out around him; plains, hills, and ridges dotted by clusters of dark green. A moment passed before he realized what he saw: snow. Tiny flakes danced from the sky, settling on his skin where the warmth of his body melted them. Lysia stood not far from him, looking around with her eyes wide open, her ponytail speckled with white. Her arms were folded around her chest and she was shivering.

"Jespar?" she said when she saw him.

"…That's my name." Jespar crossed to her, his boots sinking ankle-deep into the snow with each step. "Are you okay?"

"I think so." She shuddered, wrapped her arms tighter around her chest. "Frankly, this isn't what I expected."

"Me neither. Have you seen Kawu?"

Lysia nodded in Jespar's direction. "Behind you."

He looked. Kawu stood some twenty arm-lengths away from them in the white vastness, gazing up the mountain that rose to the north. They walked over to him, snow falling into Jespar's boots and soaking them with cold wet. Kawu turned around to face them. He looked miserable—his skin bloodless, his lips purple—and yet there was fascination in his eyes.

"Is this…?"

He's never seen it.

Jespar smiled. "Yes. That's snow."

For a breath, the pain and exhaustion on Kawu's face disappeared as he watched the flakes swirl from the overcast sky, the sun a bright disk behind a blanket of clouds. Then that hollowness came back again. "We should go."

Kawu's intuition was their only compass. Hour after hour, they trudged through the snow, cresting slope after slope with no apparent direction. Had this been reality, they would have frozen to death. Here they felt the cold, but without consequence. Shivers shook their bodies, their fingers and toes went numb and their lips purple. Still, somehow, they always found the strength to go on.

Because it's not real.

Regardless of how long they marched, the mountain in the distance never seemed to come closer, and the landscape never seemed to change—hill after hill, carpeted by the same dreamy white monotony that only the occasional cluster of brown shrubs or spruces broke up. At last, they descended a hill that led them down to a plateau that ended at a sharp precipice. They made their way across, stopping at the steep cliff.

Lysia drew a long breath. "Stars burn me."

A promontory spread out at the foot of the cliff, bordering on a roiling ocean. At the tip of the promontory stood a castle. Just like her dream, Vel'Nyx's manor was nothing like

what Jespar had expected. In many ways it looked more like an Endralean fortress than a Kiléan ziggurat: pointed roofs, arched windows, round towers built from gray stone. There were no real defensive works except for a fenced wall perhaps five arm-lengths tall. Its black wrought-iron rods and elegant gateway contrasted the white vastness surrounding it. The walls and the castle enclosed a spacious courtyard, at the center of which stood an empty fountain adorned by what seemed to be a giant statue of a myrad, wings spread, head facing skyward. Snow blanketed the red-tiled roofs, the windowsills, and the statue.

For some time they just stood there, looking at the massive structure and the turbulent ocean behind it.

Lysia drew her scarf tighter over her mouth, the breath from her nostrils forming white clouds. “That’s it?”

“Yuz,” Kawu said, “that’s it.”

It took them another hour to find a way down onto the promontory then another to slog through the good half mile of snow that preceded the castle. No soul was to be seen, neither man nor animal. Only the wind, the waves in the distance, and the crunching of the snow under their boots marred the silence. Several times, Jespar’s head hurt as his mind wrestled with the absurdity of what was happening to him: He knew he was in someone else’s head. He knew his physical body was in Jaaros Oonai’s ziggurat, where Mâadira’s guards fought their futile fight to keep the mob out. He knew that, while they’d been going for days, just a few minutes had passed in reality.

When they reached the castle gate, the sun was setting in hues of orange and purple over the pointed roofs. Even the courtyard was deserted, the skeletons of what had once probably been coniferous shrubs poking out from the crevices at the base of the walls. Warm light glowed behind the windows.

“Someone’s home,” Jespar said.

They exchanged uneasy glances. Then, Kawu crossed the gate, and Jespar and Lysia followed.

This was it.

Chapter 21

Mongrel

THE DOOR FELL SHUT BEHIND THEM and they were greeted with warmth. The snow in Jespar's hair melted, trickling down his forehead and cheeks in tiny rivulets. Blood rushed into his tingling fingers. With a sigh, Jespar leaned against the door and waited for his body to adjust to the temperature. In reality, it would have taken him many painful hours to recover from the biting frost. Here, he felt life return to his limbs a couple of heartbeats later.

The hall was deserted.

Lysia walked a few steps into the lobby, her boots clacking on the polished marble floor. "Shall we?" she said, glancing at Jespar.

Jespar pushed himself off the wall then loosened his blue scarf. It was soaking wet from the snowfall.

The lobby rose about fifteen arm-lengths high, the walls bordering in cornices that flowed into an ornamented stucco ceiling. A chandelier hung from its center, casting hypnotizing patterns and reflections of light and shadow onto the floor and the imperial staircase that rose at the far end of the lobby. Suits of armor, vases, and benches fronted the walls. Two hallways branched off each side.

They were halfway to the stairs when Kawu raised a hand. "Do you hear that?"

Jespar listened. After a while, he became conscious of a soft lute melody floating through the deserted manor, almost too quiet to hear.

"Is that music?"

"I think so." Kawu cocked his head at the first hallway that emerged on the left. "It's coming from down there."

Uneasily, they followed the sound. The corridor was long, a red carpet with golden fringes running down its entire length. Wrought iron grates fronted the windows in the outer wall, beyond which the white expanse of Vel'Nyx's dream spread into the distance, dyed red by the setting sun. Crystal sconces lined the walls, tinting the hallway with a subdued light that gave the paintings between them a haunting air, even though most of them only showed landscapes or elegantly dressed women.

They passed a few rooms—a library, a dining chamber, and some sleeping quarters—but all of them were empty. At its end, the hallway forked, both branches leading to a spiral staircase, the left one going up, the right one down. Jespar nodded to the right.

They descended, emerging in another hallway that looked like a copy of the one above, only this one had no windows and the air was moister and warmer. They traversed it warily, the sounds of their footfalls blending with the strange lute melody that flitted through the corridor like the whisper of a ghost. More rooms opened off the sides, all perfectly clean, the blankets smoothed, and fires crackling in the hearths. They had almost reached the end of the corridor when a face peeked around the corner.

They froze.

It was a woman—young, late teens, early twenties at most, with a pretty, porcelain doll-like face framed by wet curls hanging down to her exposed shoulders. The dim light made it hard to tell her expression, but she seemed to be smiling. Before any of them had the chance to react, her smile widened and she disappeared behind the corner with a giggle.

Jespar turned to the others. "Did… did you see that?"

"Yeah." Lysia put her hand on the hilt of her baton. "Kawu? You said dreams aren't dangerous, right?"

"Not as long as I'm with you," Kawu said. "We can leave this *tuewa* any time we want." His eyes wandered to the ceiling then back to his feet. He wrapped his arms across his chest. "Though there is something peculiar about this place. It's so… solid."

"What do you mean?" Jespar asked.

Kawu rubbed his eyes. A web of red veins surrounded his green irises, like an infectious growth. “Hard to describe. Most dreams are unstable and volatile, but this one isn’t. Either way, it doesn’t matter. Let’s move on.”

Lysia let go of her baton. “What about the girl?”

“We should follow her. As I said, we’re safe as long as we don’t break the dream’s narrative, and since that girl is an expression of Vel’Nyx’s subconscious, she might actually show us where to go.”

The hallway the young woman had disappeared into turned out to be identical to the one they were on, the sole difference being the wet footprints on the carpet. It went on like that, one hallway following the other, and at the end of each the young woman awaited them, peeking around the corner like a child playing hide and seek. Whenever they came near or called out to her, she giggled and disappeared into the next corridor, the scent of patchouli and rose trailing her like a lover’s memory. After the tenth hallway, Jespar couldn’t have possibly traced the way back anymore. *We’re safe*, he thought, but it did little to ease the fear growing inside his chest. Just when Jespar thought the chase would never end, they turned into another corridor—and a room opened up in front of them.

It was round, shaped like an Endralean chapel, with a domed ceiling supported by columns with grooves running up their lengths. A circular water basin was worked into the center of the room and steam rose from it, tinged orange by the fire in the wall sconces.

The room was crowded with women. Slender and curvy, dark-skinned and fair, blond- and raven-haired, all nude and all of the same pure, youthful beauty as the woman from the hallways. Some lounged and toyed around in the pool; some sat or lay on the pillowed stone chaises or sumptuous floor bedding against the walls, dozing or caressing each other.

For a breath, Jespar didn’t understand what about the scene seemed so odd to him, apart from the obvious. Then he understood: According to their body language and the movements of their mouths, most of the women were talking or laughing—and yet the

hall lay strangely silent save for the splashing of water and the melody that originated from a red-haired woman playing the harp between two potted junipers.

Jespar watched the scene with a mixture of fascination and disconcertment, Lysia merely raised an eyebrow. Kawu's face remained as blank and tired as before.

None of the women reacted to their presence, except for an older one who sat on a stone bench on the opposite side of the room, a glass of wine in her hand that matched the color of her knee-long dress. A young black woman with long curls rested her head on the woman's lap, eyes closed, her chest rising and falling evenly.

Vel'Nyx.

She studied them with an absent expression, her fingers tracing through the girl's coarse hair.

Lysia gripped her baton tighter. "Is that…?"

"Must be," Jespar said.

In reality, all Jespar had ever seen of the Third Magnate was her age-dotted hand through the palanquin curtains in the Great Bazaar. And still, it was clear to him that Vel'Nyx's dreaming self was younger than her counterpart in the waking world. There was something soft, almost fragile to her face that even high cheekbones and shallow wrinkles couldn't take away. Her hair, black with only a touch of gray, was cut to chin-length, and even from afar there was something cold and calculating about her eyes.

Don't break the narrative.

As mind-boggling as the concept of convincing Vel'Nyx's dreaming self to release the dream-eater was, it had one major advantage: Convincing the real Vel'Nyx would have been near-impossible. She had infected Oonai because she wanted to ensure his silence, so what interest could she possibly have in curing him? Here, on the other hand, they were communicating with her subconscious, which made success far more likely, especially since, according to Kawu, releasing the dream-eater required as little as a single thought. They had to understand the mosaic that was Vel'Nyx's mind, remove a piece, and replace it with another.

But how?

When Lysia had asked Kawu the exact same question as he'd prepared the droga for their ritual, he said, "I think our best chance is to appeal to her pragmatism. She infected Oonai in an attempt to protect the Overgrowth Plan, but now that the Scythe has betrayed it, she must see that there's nothing to be gained from Oonai's death anymore. On the contrary, if anyone can still stop Kilé and her whole livelihood from falling apart, it's him. Even she has to see that."

"And if that doesn't work?" Jespar asked.

"Then we have to appeal to her humanity."

Lysia snorted. "Think she even knows what that is?"

"There must be some left in her," Kawu said. "Trust me. I've traveled 'evil' people's minds before, and there's always a part that knows what they're doing is wrong, unless they're *sawahe*. And, if Vel'Nyx were, her dreams would look different. Releasing the dream-eater might be her chance at absolution, and she knows it." His tired eyes drifted off, and he added, "She has to."

Jespar kept his doubts to himself.

Slowly, they circled the basin. Even as they descended the stairs, all the young women remained oblivious to their presence, except for the one they'd chased through the hallway. She had eased down on a bed of pillows near the foot of the stairs, next to a brunette and a blonde woman lying locked in an embrace, kissing each other. The girl flashed Jespar a conspiratorial smile as he passed by. Halfway through the room—Vel'Nyx still hadn't given them as much as a nod in recognition—the harpist's song ended and she broke into a melancholic arpeggio to which she rocked her head from side to side with her eyes closed. They came to a halt a few steps from the Third Magnate, and she spoke at last.

"Well, well," she said, running her eyes up and down Lysia, "how come I've never seen you before?"

If Lysia felt any discomfort, she disguised it well. "Interesting place you have here."

She did her job well, her voice calm and well-measured, as if her being here was perfectly natural. Vel'Nyx smiled joylessly. She gazed up at the fresco that was worked

into the domed ceiling, then let her eyes wander around the room. By the staircase, the brunette had led her hand between the thighs of the blonde, easing her into a soft moan. The three women lounging in the basin swam up to the edge, resting their elbows on the stone, and watched the two with curious smiles.

"Really?" Vel'Nyx said. "I suppose age has made me jaded." She glanced at Jespar, then at Kawu. "Your friends don't seem to be feeling well, girl."

"It was a long journey," Lysia said.

"Well, the weather certainly isn't for everyone." She nodded at the bench beside her. "Why don't you sit, dear? You look dreadfully tense."

This time, it was Jespar who answered. "I'm afraid there's no time for that. We have news from the city."

Vel'Nyx chuckled. "From the scorching hellhole, you mean?"

Her answer took Jespar by surprise. Kawu came to his aid. "The city is in great danger. We're here because we believe you can help us save it."

Vel'Nyx frowned then momentarily turned her attention back to the woman sleeping in her lap. She gently traced her fingers down the girl's neck. "How interesting."

Kawu gave Jespar a helpless look. His head spun as he tried to come up with an appropriate answer. "Ma'saa," Jespar said, "let me be frank. We know you're to blame for what happened."

Vel'Nyx's hand froze.

He continued. "We know about your plan, and so does the Coalition. You and Oonai orchestrated the riot by building up the Scythe to get rid of your adversaries. The 'overgrowth,' as you put it."

Vel'Nyx's face lost some of her impassiveness, and alarm replaced it. The harpist's arpeggios took up speed, her hair swaying with the movements of her head.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do," Jespar said. "But your plan failed. The Scythe betrayed you and butchered the entire guard. They devastated your ziggurat and are now laying siege to Oonai's. Whatever you envisioned this thing playing out without the First Magnate, it

didn't." His eyes narrowed, his fists clenched. He didn't have to fake the emotion, because he felt it. "If nothing happens, the Scythe is going to lay waste to the entire country, and you'll lose everything you have—every sêr you stored in the Coalition's treasuries, every jewel you hide in your palace. The Scythe will raze Kilé to the ground and impose a rule of the workers, and their world won't have a place for people like you."

Vel'Nyx's eyes twitched, the hand she held her wine with starting to shake. "You're wrong." She gulped down the wine. "You're wrong. I planned it all out, to the last detail. The Scythe receive the second half of their payment only when it's all over, so there's nothing to gain from defying us. Not to mention that they know as well as we do that this 'rule of the workers' they're preaching is a pipe dream. The Holy Order would intervene and hang each and every one of them as soon as they put that crown on their ugly heads."

Lysia crossed her arms. "Apparently that's not how they see it."

Vel'Nyx's hand on the woman's neck tightened. Then she shook her head. "No. You're completely deluded."

They stared at each other for some breaths then Lysia gave an angry sigh. "Look, Ma'saa, it's simple.: If anyone can still stop the Scythe, it's Oonai. Hell knows how, but his ziggurat is the last one standing. Now, as it happens, we also know that you infected him with a dream-eater when he told you he was going to back out of the plan to ensure his silence. Good job—you succeeded. Now, unless you want to see your entire country fall into ruin, I suggest you give Oonai one last chance to save it and recall that *godsdamned* bug."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Vel'Nyx said, gripping the woman's neck tighter. The woman continued to doze, on her lips the same blissful smile the other women wore. "And you will watch your language around me."

Lysia stared at her in disbelief. Then darkness fell over Lysia's face. Her jaw tensed and her fists clenched.

Jespar put a hand on her shoulder. "Lysia…"

She shook him off and stepped to Vel'Nyx, who flinched back as if Lysia had swung a blow at her.

"Why?" Lysia's voice trembled. "Why lie? Where's the fucking point of it?"

"I'm not lying. I know nothing about a parasite. Saaras'jodule, I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about!"

"Liar!" With this, Lysia lunged at Vel'Nyx and grabbed her by the throat with both hands. "Fucking liar!"

Gods.

Jespar turned to Kawu, who watched the scene with dread, but didn't move.

Do something.

Do something or she's going to collapse the dream.

And yet, for some reason, he couldn't. He just stood there, his boots glued to the wet marble, his muscles unresponsive.

"Release it!" Lysia screamed.

Vel'Nyx's eyes widened in terror. She opened her mouth, but only croaks came out. The harpist's arpeggio increased its speed.

"Release it or I'll fucking kill you!"

Again Jespar tried to move; again, he couldn't. Kawu seemed no different.

Lysia kept on screaming at Vel'Nyx, all the while the Third Magnate's face turned redder and redder, croaks breaking from her throat. She kicked at Lysia, clawed at her hands, but she couldn't break free. The woman in her lap dozed on as if nothing was happening, the harpist played faster and faster and faster, until—

A string broke.

The music ceased.

Vel'Nyx's grip on Lysia's hands weakened, the kicking stopped. Her eyes rolled up, and her body went limp.

Silence filled the hall.

Jespar stared at Lysia, her eyes wide, her mouth agape. The harpist put her hands in her lap, blood running from the nails. After what seemed like an eternity, Lysia at last let go of Vel'Nyx's throat and backed away.

"Lysia…" Jespar whispered.

Lysia turned to face him, her face ashen. "I didn't—that wasn't me. One moment I was here, the next—"

Jespar looked at his hands. The paralysis was gone. Before he had a chance to speak, someone giggled behind him.

He turned. The three women in the basin—one red-haired, one black, one blond—were looking at them, arms wrapped around each other's shoulders, cheeky grins plastered across their faces.

What the hell?

Kawu muttered something. Jespar took a step back. "Kawu? What the hell is going on here?"

The girl chuckled again, and this time, her friends laughed with her. "She knows," Kawu said. "Gods… she knows."

The other girls in the room joined in. Jespar drew his daggers, his eyes darting from woman to woman, but none of them seemed threatening, they just looked and laughed and pointed fingers at them, like a group of children ridiculing another who'd just done something incredibly stupid. Facing the room, Lysia backed away from Vel'Nyx's lifeless body, her hands raised as if trying to communicate surrender.

Vel'Nyx's eyes popped open and she bolted upright and flicked a finger between Lysia's shoulders.

As if hit by a battering ram, Lysia flew forward, landing in the basin. Water sloshed over the three women, who shielded themselves with their arms from the splash and resulting wave, shrieking in delight.

"Lysia!"

Jespar ran to the basin—or tried to. His feet once again refused to move.

Lysia broke to the surface, gasping for air. The girls howled with laughter, fingers pointed at Lysia. All the while Vel'Nyx observed the scene from her bench, a pale smile on her lips. Lysia's eyes darted left and right like a trapped animal.

"Very well," Vel'Nyx finally said over the din. "Enough."

But the women didn't stop, they kept laughing louder and louder, until the chamber resembled a madhouse. The heat felt smoldering, the steam heavy in Jespar's lungs, like some moist, toxic fume.

"Enough!"

Silence fell.

"Get out. Now."

For a heartbeat, the women remained frozen in place. Then, one after another, they got up from their benches, rose from their pillows, climbed out of their basins, and left the room in a surreal procession.

Jespar watched them depart, still unable to move. Only when the last—the girl that had been dozing on Vel'Nyx's lap—had disappeared in the red-lit corridor, did control return to his muscles.

Vel'Nyx stood and tossed a towel to the edge of the basin, not far from Lysia. "Dry yourself," Vel'Nyx said.

Hesitating, Lysia swam to the edge and lifted herself out of the water. Then, not taking her eyes from the Third Magnate, she picked up the towel and did as she was asked. Vel'Nyx watched with a disinterested smile. Then she turned to Kawu, who stood rooted to the spot.

"Yuz, boy," she said, "I know you're a dreamwalker. Does that answer your question?"

Kawu said nothing.

"You know we're…" Jespar started, but trailed off when he didn't know whether he should finish the sentence.

"I know you're visitors to my *tuewa*, young man. Indeed."

"… How?"

"Because I have the gift too, just like your Makehu friend here." She gave Kawu a cursory glance. "Frankly, I'm surprised there are still more of my kind. I knew about that woman from Yuva and the old man from Teenos, but he died last year. Never about a boy, though. Unless…" She rolled her eyes. "Of course. You're Takana's son, aren't you? No, don't say anything—I can see the resemblance." Her eyes trailed off. "Poor, poor boy. How do you stand it?"

She ambled over to the basin and looked at the water. The ripples were slowly calming. "I hate it, you know? Always awake, always present, for sixty-seven years… the only time this 'gift' gave me a rest was when I fell from a wall as a kid and almost broke my back." She clicked her fingers. "Silence, just like that… black, soothing oblivion, the way the ungifted get it every cursed night. Of course, it lasted only a day or so before it was all back to normal."

Her eyes followed the brush strokes of the ceiling mural. It showed a naked man and a woman embracing each other in a clouded sky. Then she sighed and turned back to Kawu. "Ah, well, such is life. Not every choice is ours to make."

A bitter taste had formed in Jespar's mouth. He swallowed it down. "I thought only Makehu can be dreamwalkers."

"She is," Kawu said quietly. "A part of her."

Vel'Nyx smiled. "Well observed, boy… I'm a mongrel. It doesn't show that much, but the blood's there."

Lysia was done drying herself, but still held on to the towel, as if she'd forgotten about it. There was a hollow look about her eyes. "So you knew we weren't part of your dream all along?"

"What do you expect? I created this place."

"Then why the charade? Why not tell us right away, or kick us out?"

Vel'Nyx shrugged. "Entertainment, I suppose. I don't find many laughs these days, so every diversion is welcome. Plus, the last visitor I got in this place was decades ago, so this was quite intriguing." Vel'Nyx walked over to the harp, placing her fingers on the anchor of the torn string. When she withdrew them, it was restored. "Of course curiosity

was a factor too. I wanted to know what on Vyn two outlanders and a Makehu are doing in my dream. Now I do."

Lysia scowled. "And making me strangle you? Was that part of the entertainment too?"

"As I said, I don't get many laughs these days." She glided her fingers across the harp, plucking a series of dissonant tones. "So, a dream-eater, isn't it? That conceited fool got himself infected with a brain parasite. I thought they died out."

The looks on their faces must have spoken volumes. Vel'Nyx smiled again, this time a pleasant, warm smile that might have been likable had it not been for the words it accompanied. "That's right, I know nothing about this. I don't know where you got the idea, but it appears you've been chasing phantoms."

No.

An iron clamp closed around Jespar's neck. His forehead tickled, ants crawling over his skull.

"You're lying," Lysia said. "It has to be you."

That's impossible.

"Girl, saying something again and again doesn't make it any more true. I have nothing to do with Oonai's condition."

Jespar forced down the rising panic. "But he got second thoughts and wanted to back out. You *had* to keep him silent."

Vel'Nyx rested her elbow on the harp's neck, a masculine posture at odds with her appearance and demeanor. "Yuz and no. Yuz, Oonai got second thoughts for some obscure reason I haven't understood to this day, yuz, he wanted to back out, but, no, my plan was never to keep him silent. I knew he couldn't talk even if he wanted to."

Jespar swallowed hard. "Why not?"

"Because it would have achieved the complete opposite of what he was trying to achieve, and he knew it. Even with the Twins gone, the Scythe would have still been there, and the worker's revolt would have happened… only that this way, it would have probably stretched out over years rather than be done with in a single stroke. Also, coming clean would have meant the certain death of not just himself but his sweet, sweet

wife, whom he loves so dearly. Say what you want about the Coalition's justice, but it can't be described as 'lenient.'"

Lysia snorted. "He doesn't give a rat's ass about his wife."

"Because he cheated on her, I know, hundreds and hundreds of times. That doesn't change his feelings, though—we actually talked about this once in his manor, back when he was so obsessed with that servant girl. These women were just diversions to him, toys to use for his pleasure, who never in any way competed with the ma'saa. It's silly, I know, but that's Jaaros Oonai: As long as he finds a way to spin a story in which his actions are justified, the man will do anything."

Jespar croaked a laugh that sounded more desperate than he wanted. "So, what, you just took the risk and let him go his merry way when he told you he was backing out? Do you seriously expect us to believe that?"

"I didn't say that," Vel'Nyx replied. "Only that I didn't consider *him* a risk. Of course I tied up whatever loose ends I could."

"The servants of Kaâra Manor," Kawu said under his breath.

For the first time, something akin to concern showed in the Third Magnate's face. "So you know. Did they at least get the job done?"

When no one answered, Vel'Nyx shrugged. "Well, it's irrelevant. If what you said is right, the Scythe already did their job, and with the Coalition and the other magnates gone, there's no one left to judge. Also, who cares about the word of a bunch of have-not servants."

Jespar clenched his fists. "Are you deaf? The Scythe did a lot more than just their job, they betrayed your plan and are about to take over the fucking country!"

"That *was* the job, young man."

There was a long pause. Lysia was the first to find her words again. "What on Vyn are you talking about?"

"You heard me. If what you say it's true, and I have little reason to think you're lying, the Scythe did exactly what I wanted them to do." She plucked a string of the harp. "To tear it all down."

Seeing their reaction, that faint, disinterested smile returned to Vel'Nyx's face. "What, did you really think I didn't know what I was in for when I hired those two lunatics? I know they're *sawahe*—I would have known even without the gift. They wanted destruction; I wanted destruction. So, we joined forces and made it happen. Only that that poor, foolish man was too blind to see it."

It took Jespar a moment to realize she was talking about Oonai. "You… you never wanted the Overgrowth Plan to succeed."

Vel'Nyx walked back to the stone bench, arranged the cushions, and sat. "Oh, I did want it to succeed. Oonai and I merely had different objectives. Overgrowth…" she scoffed, shook her head. "Our entire culture is overgrowth, not just the fat uppers Oonai wouldn't stop crying about. Fortune Road, 'Land of Opportunities,' 'Chances, not obstacles…' What asinine nonsense. What hypocritical, asinine nonsense. Kilé was never about who works the hardest but about who's at the right place at the right time, and who has the right face to go along with that idiotic story they tell themselves. Why do you think Oonai got the crown back then and not me? Not because he was smarter than me, not because he had worked harder toward his goals, not because he was in any way 'superior.' He got it because he was a young, virile man with a square jaw and an impressive beard, the textbook example of what people subconsciously perceive as a ruler. And me? Just an aging, quiet woman who has no husband and no heirs, and who prefers to listen rather than hear herself talk. Just a mongrel."

No.

Thoughts raced through Jespar's head, answers, questions, appeals, but whenever he tried to grasp one of them, they eluded him.

No!

Vel'Nyx looked at Kawu, her eyes two black daggers. "Don't ever listen to them when they tell you you're equal, boy. Sure, they don't hunt us down like they hunt the nomads in Arazeal. Sure, there are the elders, but that's all just eyewash. I mean, they certainly fooled me at first… I once thought the reason so few Makehu are at the top was that most of them prefer to wallow in their self-pity instead of grabbing fate by its throat and doing

something about it instead. Of course, I was deluding myself. My skin had just the right shade of brown and my eyes had just the right angle to pass as a Kiléan, so I made it far before the secret of my ancestry spilled at last. Even then, I did all I could to ignore the obvious, how suddenly there were barriers that hadn't been barriers before, how there always seemed to be that certain something that stopped me from truly getting to the top. That I made it as far as Third Magnate was already incredible, but not so unlike Oonai, I shut my eyes from the whole truth for as long as I could. Then, suddenly, there comes this green, self-obsessed boy with barely thirty years on his back, and, oh, wonder, he simply slips past all these obstacles I had to fight so hard to overcome. He's good, I'll give him that—" her frown deepened, casting a net of wrinkles around her mouth—"but *not* better than me. And yet, three years later, there we stand, competing for the Magnate's Crown, the opportunity I worked for my entire life. Frankly, I wasn't even surprised when they announced the result of the votes." She closed her eyes, rubbed her left temple with the heel of her hand. "I turned to the Makehu elders after that happened, telling them about this systemic injustice, but no, they wouldn't even hear me out. Turns out I was too light for the Makehu and too dark for the Kiléans. Finally, I gave up completely… good riddance to bad rubbish. I grinned and bore it, observed and learned, until I got the idea for the plan."

"You wanted to get back at the Coalition," Kawu said. All the emotion was gone from his voice. "You never cared about establishing a diarchy with Oonai."

Vel'Nyx gave him a smile. There was a cold to it that made Jespar's blood ice over. "I wanted exactly what I told Oonai I did: to cut away the overgrowth. Only that every single cursed member of this guild of liars was part of it."

Lysia's nostrils twitched. "And that justifies the deaths of thousands?"

"Collateral damage. I made my point, and that's what matters."

Lysia tensed, tears forming on her lids. Jespar put a hand on her shoulder. When he spoke, he was surprised at how controlled he sounded when all he wanted was to scream.

"If you didn't infect Oonai then who did?"

Vel'Nyx didn't reply; she simply looked at him, her hands folded in her lap.

"Please," Jespar said. "If you know, you have to tell us. Oonai's dream-eater infected me, and killing his is the only way to kill mine. Please, I… Gods, I never wanted any part of this, I just—"

"I don't know."

Silence stretched out between them.

"I don't know," Vel'Nyx repeated. "I told you, I don't know who infected him. And even if I did, if saving you meant saving that old fool, I wouldn't tell you. Living in an eternal nightmare until the parasite has sucked the last bit of life out of you? Good. Maybe that finally teaches him some humility."

Lysia's fingers dug into her upper arms. "You're a monster. You're a fucking monster."

Vel'Nyx looked at Lysia the way one might have looked at a tantrum-throwing child. Jespar recognized it. It was the same annoyance Enkshi had shown when he'd been forced to tell them about Oonai's extramarital affairs. Maybe Vel'Nyx understood the monstrosity of her words, maybe she didn't. Either way, from her perspective, Lysia was simply too stupid to understand.

Or simply irrelevant.

"Is that all?" Vel'Nyx asked.

One last rush of resistance welled up. "We're going to tell the Order what you did," Jespar said, his voice shaking. "We're going to tell them everything, and they'll hang you."

Vel'Nyx snorted. "And what are you going to tell them? That you visited me in my dream where I gave you a full confession?"

When no one answered, she stood and smoothed her robes. "Good night. For what it's worth, I'm sorry you got caught up in this, but as I said, not all choices are ours to make. Such is life." She turned to Kawu. "If you want some advice, go easy on using your gift. Whatever it is you're doing, if you keep going at this pace, you're not going to make it much longer."

"Please," Jespar whispered. "You need to—"

“Good night.”

The dream collapsed.

Chapter 22

Hulls

IT'S OVER. That was the only thought he had when he opened his eyes. They'd given it their all, fought to the last breath, held out until the bitter end, and failed.

Over.

Done.

The end.

Jespar stared at the relief adorning the ceiling. It showed a hunting scene, more stylized half-naked men with long beards running after some giant lizard.

Wasn't this the time for panic? Screaming? Tears? Desperate, futile last measures?

If so, his psyche was now as fucked up as this entire affair had been from the start. He felt absolutely nothing.

Lysia groaned as she sat up next to him, one hand pressing against her forehead. Kawu knelt before them, buttocks-on-heels, eyes closed, his face skeletal in the flickering torchlight.

Lysia asked Jespar if he was all right.

Still staring at the ceiling, he told her he felt fine. It was true, after all. He *was* fine, though their last hope had turned out to be a mirage. He *was* fine, though it meant that there was nothing they could do to stop the parasite from hatching. He *was* fine, though the Corpse sat on a chair across the room, his skin dripping off his jaw onto Oonai's severed head resting in the Corpse's lap. The exposed muscles around his mouth contracted, forming a grimace that might have been a smile. His flayed right hand traced through the magnate's greasy shock of hair, like a father comforting his dying son. He felt fine when the blanket beneath him turned into ice, the chamber dissolved into the ocean, and the crust broke and he sank.

He felt fine because he was going home to the place a coward belonged.

Warmth flooded him, pulled him back into reality. He sat up with a gasp, Kawu's pallid face just a finger-length from his own, his hot palms pressed against Jespar's temples. Gods, how ill he looked, how frail, how tired, how empty. How long until he'd go cold too?

And all just because Jespar was too stubborn to let go.

***

In the study, Lysia did most of the talking. Mâadira listened with her arms crossed, her angular stature out of place in the delicately ornamented mahogany chair. When they were done telling their story it was a long time before she replied, "She'll hang for this." Her voice was without emotion, as if she declared an already accomplished fact. "I'll see to it myself."

Provided any of you make it out of here alive, Jespar thought.

The sergeant unfolded her arms.

"Either way, as much as I wished this mission of yours had borne fruit, it doesn't change anything about the plan. We still have to get Ma'saa Oonai out of the ziggurat as fast possible. Then, afterward, we can take care of his parasite."

And mine.

"The good news is," Mâadira continued, "the scouts I sent ahead came back just ten minutes ago and said the alcoves are safe. We're preparing everything for the evacuation as we speak."

Lysia drew a deep breath. "When will you leave?"

"Half an hour, give or take. It's going to be a small escort, twenty guards maximum, a healer, plus, of course, Ma'saa and Ma'sao Oonai. We'll have to carry them out."

"And the remainder?" Jespar asked, knowing the answer.

"They'll stay here and defend the ziggurat for as long as they can to buy us time." She looked at Jespar, her expression defiant though he hadn't said anything. "It's the only

option. Evacuating the entire place would take us thrice as long, and the have-nots would be through the gate in no time."

No one replied. What was there to say? She was right: Save all the guards, die together. Sacrifice them and perhaps survive.

"Well," Mâadira said, rising from her chair, "be in the atrium in half an hour. If you're not there, we'll go without you."

She left.

For a while, they just sat there—Lysia with her hands folded on the table, eyes resting on her interlocked fingers as if hidden somewhere in there was the answer to their predicament. Jespar slumped in his chair, one arm hanging limply over the backrest, legs crossed ankle-on-knee, looking at a burned-down candle on the table whose wick struggled to stay alive in the growing pool of wax. Kawu sat still as a painting, hands on his lap, his eyes two half-closed crescents in a bloodless face.

So frail, Jespar thought. After the refocusing following Vel'Nyx's dream, Jespar had asked Kawu more than once how he was. Though the answer was obvious, Kawu, not so unlike Jespar, had insisted he was fine. He'd keep refocusing him until they found the assassin, whatever the price.

Jespar would live.

"There's still hope," Lysia said. Her forehead wrinkled and her jawbone showed under her skin, concentrated, focused, as if she were working out a plan.

An empty smile tugged at the corners of Jespar's mouth.

Lysia. Kawu.

Two people he'd only just met, who for some reason had taken a liking to him and were now risking their own lives to save his. It wasn't the first time strangers had shown this type of kindness toward him. In fact, it was almost a pattern. Wherever he went, people were there to help him out of trouble. He had no idea what he'd done to deserve this. Perhaps it was something in his face, something in his demeanor. He knew it certainly wasn't because he always repaid the favor.

He thought: *Coward.*

"Is there?" Jespar asked.

Lysia squinted into the fading candle. The wick had almost reached the pool of wax, its inevitable fate. "Yeah. Think about it, we'll be out of here in maybe four hours, and instead of going to Kiia with the sergeant, we'll just stay behind and continue investigating. We could go—"

"Lysia."

"We could go back to Kaâra Manor," she continued, "at least for a start—that vision the bug sent you has got to mean something. We just have to find out what, and then we can piece together—"

"Lysia!"

She fell silent, cheeks reddened, eyes narrowed.

"Look, I appreciate this, Lysia, I really do. But there's no way I'm going to hold out that long. We need to be realistic." Resistance welled up inside him. He pushed it back down. "In a couple of hours, the dream-eater will have me. That's just how it is."

"But the refocusings—"

"Are almost useless by now. The last one barely lasted two hours, and Kawu can't do any more without putting himself at severe risk, though he's too proud to admit it. You heard what Vel'Nyx told him."

"That bloody snake said a lot of things."

Jespar cocked his head at Kawu. "Ask him yourself then."

If Kawu had been following their conversation, he didn't show it. He just sat there, eyes closed and unmoving, as if trapped in some strange sleep. Lysia eyed him, hesitating. Then she exhaled heavily and reclined in her chair, wiping her eyes. "There has to be something we can do."

A dull bang echoed in the distance. There was shouting, loud enough to breach the false sense of security the study in the ziggurat garden provided.

He thought: *Coward.*

He thought: *Failure.*

"Yeah," Jespar said. "There is something."

Lysia glanced up.

"I'll just have to let it happen."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. What's the worst that can happen? Oonai has been under his parasite's influence for weeks and he's still alive." *But dying, and going through literal hell.* "Once I'm… asleep and you're safe, you can continue looking for the culprit. It's less dangerous for Kawu this way, and you don't have to worry about me going nuts every other minute."

"But with the time distortion, that would mean months in a nightmare!"

"Not if you get lucky and find the assassin fast."

"And just how likely is that? We've been chasing this man or woman for a week and all our trails turned out to be dead ends."

"Well, what's the alternative? If there's another option I'm simply not seeing that doesn't entail killing Kawu, I'll gladly take it. But there's just no way I can allow this to go on."

Lysia crossed her arms, her eyes flicking from Jespar to Kawu, and back to Jespar. Then she drew a long breath. "Okay. Okay, maybe you're right. If you really think he can't take any more, then you're right. I just hope…" She pressed her eyes shut. "Oh, stars burn me, what a *fucking* mess!"

Jespar attempted a smile that probably looked as forced as it felt. "Lysia," he said, "I can take it."

He thought of the tribunal, packed with corpses. Skin cut off his body by rusty knives. He thought of an insect growing out the back of his head, its fat, bulbous body expanding and contracting as it fed on his screams.

"Can you?" Lysia asked.

I don't know.

I don't know and I'm fucking terrified.

He said, "I have to."

On the other side of the table, Kawu collapsed.

***

Jespar stood at the banister of the twelfth tier, looking out past the ziggurat walls. The stars were weak that night, veiled by the red and gray haze from the fires blazing along Fortune Road. From up here, the mob at the gates was an indistinct mass of shapes and bodies illuminated by the dots of torches and lanterns, like some living, malevolent, glowing ooze. Jespar had imagined the chanting would cease or diminish as the siege progressed, but he'd been wrong. The mob, spread across almost half the meadow, had only grown louder, filling the night with their never-ending crescendo.

The dream is rotten.

The guards that had attacked the mob's flank had been defeated, and while darkness and tall grass made it hard to see their corpses, pinpricks of light glittered in the ocean of grass, their nuvium plates reflecting the moon or the torches of the rebels combing the battlefield for weapons and armor. While the main body of the crowd remained near the jungle and the entrance to the meadow, where new insurgents still came pouring in, pockets of rebels repeatedly advanced on the gate, pushing fire-spitters and battering rams. They moved slowly and in tortoise-like formations, shields propped above them to ward off the arrows. Though their defense seemed to work—the arrows that didn't miss their mark ricocheted off the metal—they never went farther than halfway to the portcullis before turning back. To unknowing bystanders it may have looked like small victories, but Jespar recognized the strategy. The forays weren't supposed to do any damage other than to wear out the defenders. *Keep them on their toes so they can't rest.*

Five, four, perhaps as little as three hours from now, the guards would be ridden with fatigue while the Scythes had a virtually endless supply of fresh soldiers for the final charge.

Jespar turned around and let his eyes wander up the ziggurat. There was something eerily beautiful about the statue at its apex—the dying god, the shepherd watching his lambs approach to slaughter him.

Lysia joined Jespar at the banister, squinting into the night. “How’s it looking?”

“Bad. They’re wearing them out.”

“Hm. How long do you think we’ve got?”

Jespar shrugged. “I don’t know, but I think Mâadira was right—I’m sure they’ll make their move before dawn. How’s Kawu?”

“Better. The potion seems to be working, he’s already awake again. Sorry again for sending you out, it’s just…”

“I’m not much help, I know. Can he walk?”

“Probably not, but the other healer said he’ll arrange for him to be carried on another stretcher.” She shook her head. “You know, it’s so strange. On the surface, he’s the picture of health, but his body acts as if he’s lost gallons of blood. I had no idea it was that bad already.”

“Neither had I.” *Or maybe you just chose to ignore it.*

Lysia sighed. “Well, either way, I came to get you. The escort is in the atrium, and they’re leaving soon.”

“Okay.”

Lysia studied him. “How about you? How are you… feeling?”

Jespar thought about it. “All right, I guess. I feel like the last refocusing is going to last me a bit longer than the one before.” Not a lie, not the truth. He did feel sharper and clearer than after the previous refocusings, but he had no idea if that was just the result of wishful thinking and would affect the time of the next seizure. Ultimately, it didn’t matter. It would happen, and it would happen soon. The only question was how soon. If there was a silver lining to it all, it was that the seizure would, in all likelihood, come instantaneously. Back in Oonai’s sleeping chambers, it had come only seconds after the hallucination of the Corpse. Next time, one moment he’d be here; the next, the parasite would be pulling him into the nightmare world it had created. Perhaps Lysia, Mâadira, and Kawu would find the assassin, perhaps they wouldn’t. For all he knew they might not even make it out of the ziggurat.

"Good," Lysia said. "Then let's hope it stays that way until we're off this island. With Kawu being out already, we don't want to test her patience."

"I can manage," Jespar said.

About two dozen people were gathered in the atrium, most of them guards, some servants. Mâadira stood in front of a set of stairs leading down at the far right corner of the hall talking to the guards clustered around Oonai and the aged ma'saa, who each lay on their stretchers like corpses about to be taken into their crypt. Kawu lay on a third stretcher a few steps away. Two middle-aged men in servant's garbs leaned against a nearby pillar.

Relief washed through Jespar. Kawu still looked ill, but even from afar, Jespar could see that some blood had returned to his cheeks. Lysia gave Jespar a knowing nod and proceeded to Mâadira. Jespar crossed to him.

"Kawu… Thank the Gods."

Slowly, Kawu turned his head. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He tried to sit up, but dropped back down halfway. Ignoring the servants, Jespar sank to his haunches beside the stretcher and gently hugged Kawu. For some heartbeats, everything was all right. No mob in front of the gates, no dream-eater, no slowly impeding purgatory—just that prickling warmth in his belly. When Jespar withdrew, he found Kawu's eyes glistening.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Jespar asked.

"For… being so weak. I thought I could keep you safe a little longer, but…"

Jespar took Kawu's hand. It was dry and cold. "You don't owe me anything. And you did more than I could have asked for."

Kawu seemed about to argue then he averted his eyes. "Varroy said you're going to let it happen."

Jespar nodded.

Kawu shut his eyes, his lips trembling. "Gods. Gods, Jespar, I just… I just wished I could help."

"I told you, you already did more than I could have asked for. Please, Kawu, just trust me, I… I got this. I can take it. Okay?"

Before Kawu could reply, a voice cut through the hall. Sighing, Jespar gently squeezed Kawu's hand and stood, his knees cracking. Every muscle burned, the cut on his shoulder throbbed. He felt like he hadn't slept in months.

"I can take it," he said.

He walked over to Mâadira, where two soldiers each had hoisted up the stretchers with Jaaros and Nayima Oonai and where carrying them to the staircase. Lysia stood next to the sergeant, who acknowledged Jespar with a curt nod.

She turned to Lysia. "I've been thinking: I want you up front, close to the ma'saa. The healer is coming with us, but I want you around as well, just in case she wakes up or needs medical attention. Also, your dreamwalking friend will be right behind her, so you can keep an eye on him, too."

Lysia tensed. "What about Jespar?"

"I could help carry Kawu's stretcher," he said.

"No, I need you in the back," Mâadira said. She nodded at two guards leaning against the wall not far from them. One had, uncommon for a Kiléan, short blond hair, and must have been no older than Kawu. The other was old and balding, with a deep scar running across his forehead. "You'll form the tail of the escort, together with Private Zulaan and Private Bema. I don't think the rebels will break through the gate before we're well inside the tunnel island, but it never hurts to be safe and have a competent fighter defending the rear. I saw how you can fight, Dal'Varek, and your skills will come in handy."

A "competent fighter" with a bug in his brain that might turn his lights out at any given moment, he thought. He flicked Lysia a nervous glance. She nodded.

"I'll do what I can," he said. "What about Enkshi? His… remains?"

Mâadira's eyes darted to her feet. Then she looked up, a shadow over her face but stern. "We're slow enough carrying the Oonais and your friend. I had great respect for the counselor and his service to this country, but if the living are at risk, we cannot afford to care for the dead."

After a brief silence, Mâadira continued, looking at Jespar.

"The tunnel entrance is in the wine cellar, behind one of the barrels. It has a mechanism that pivots back into place once we're through, but Private Zulaan carries a small pouch of blasting powder to collapse the tunnel behind us. I'm telling you this just so you're not surprised when he stays behind to perform the detonation. It's part of the plan."

"Stays behind." Well-phrased.

Having handled blasting powder himself, Jespar knew how volatile it was. He trusted Mâadira to have ensured the charge wasn't so big that the entire tunnel would collapse onto their heads. But, for the immediate vicinity, including wherever the private himself would be when the charge went off, that might very well be the case. Jespar glanced at the old, scarred soldier. Save for a twitching around his right eye, which might just have been a tic, he seemed to accept his duty without a sign of protest.

"Questions?"

There were none.

And like that, they went, abandoning Kilé, the Coalition, and the old order for which it stood. Leaving the remaining soldiers to die, the ziggurat to be plundered. Like a funeral procession, they followed Mâadira's lead, moving slowly, their footfalls reverberating off the cavernous hallways. Marble, carpet. Marble, carpet. Stairs, corridor. Stairs, corridor. Jespar focused himself, trying to think of other things in order not to think about the parasite. He thought about how ludicrously vast the ziggurat was. It offered shelter for thousands, but only two people had called it their home. He tried to imagine what it would be like when the mob stormed it. How would they feel walking over carpets, each of which could have bought clothes for an entire village? How would they feel seeing in each door golden ornaments worth more than any worker would ever leave to his children? How would they feel, staring into the stone eyes of Jaaros Oonai's likeness enthroned at the ziggurat's apex that cost more than a lifetime's worth of food and drink?

Righteous.

They would tell themselves exactly the same thing Oonai and people like him had told themselves for millennia: that the ends justified the means.

They walked single file, Jespar at the rear, Lysia up front by the ma'saa and Kawu. The old soldier with the blasting powder walked in front of Jespar, the young one behind him, forming the very back. In the fifth corridor, Lysia fell back into step behind him.

"Hey," she said quietly.

"Aren't you supposed to be watching the ma'saa?"

"I asked for a minute with you."

Jespar lifted an eyebrow. Up front, Mâadira descended another staircase, the archway made of coarse bricks instead of the polished walls in most of the ziggurat.

The cellar.

"I just wanted to tell you that I think you're brave."

Jespar smiled faintly. "That's not what you told yon noble adventurer back in the study."

Lysia snorted. "Yeah, because I *wanted* there to be another option. But you were right, this is the only way. It could take us months to find the culprit, and given the shape the boy is in, we can safely assume he won't survive another refocusing. So, yes, Jespar, I think you're brave. You always talk about how people are selfish, yet here you are, accepting whatever that bloody bug has prepared for you rather than let the boy refocus himself to death. Because he'd do it, you know? He'd do it without batting an eyelash."

Jespar craned his neck, looking for Kawu. All he saw were his hands and his sandaled feet as the stretcher swayed slightly left and right with each step of the servants. "You don't know that."

"I have a hunch." She paused. "And I hope you know that I take my promises seriously. Once that… once 'it' happens, I'll carry you through that tunnel, even if it costs me the last of my strength. And we'll find Oonai's assassin and get this thing out of you."

She'd raised her voice toward the end, earning them a reprimanding over-the-shoulder glance from one of the soldiers up front.

Again, Jespar couldn't help but smile. "I don't get it."

"Get what?"

"Back in Kaâra Manor you wanted to call it quits, but you stayed because of me. And even now, when the smartest thing you could do would be to take to your heels and run once we're out of here, you're not giving up. I mean, why do you care so much about me? I even messed up that thing we had going, whatever it was, so what did I do to earn this?"

Lysia's eyes drifted off. She ran her fingers over her scar, tracing the zigzag pattern down to her jaw. "Frankly? Not much."

For a heartbeat, the gloom lifted. Jespar laughed and Lysia grinned, her teeth white against her tanned skin. The escort had reached the brick-walled staircase from where damp, cold air wafted over them. It was too narrow for them to descend side by side. Lysia patted him on the shoulder. "Hang in there, okay? The moment you feel anything happening, just holler and I'll be there to carry you. That's a promise."

She quickened her step and snaked ahead to the ma'saa's stretcher. Some quiet moments later, when everyone else had already disappeared down the stairs, it was Jespar's and the young soldier's turn. The stair was longer than expected, twisting at least five times. The air grew moister and stuffier with every turn, until it opened into a cellar. As Mâadira had mentioned, they'd be going through the provision chamber. Jespar expected to see a long hall with a domed ceiling, barrels and crates lining the walls. Instead, he was looking at a horde of animals.

It was a strange, wild mix: wolves, horses, lions, elephants, as well as other animals he'd never seen, like some feline creature with six legs and a colossal lizard whose open maw exposed five sets of teeth.

Jespar's shock must have showed on his face, as the young soldier beside him had a grin on his face.

"Don't worry, they're dead," he said. "That was one of Oonai's pastimes, stuffing animals. He got bored of it some years ago, though, and the beasts had to go somewhere, so this is where we put 'em."

Ahead, the escort proceeded through a line that cut right through the menagerie. Some of the guards had lit torches, tinting the low-ceilinged room in an eerie light.

"These… these are all actual animals?"

"Minus guts and blood," the guard said.

"Boy! What on Vyn are you waiting for?" It was the older soldier, the one in charge of the blasting powder. He stood a few steps ahead, at the entrance to the alley, framed by two elephants. "You too, pig-skin. I know this is all a game to you, but if you get lost we won't come looking for you." His eyes were narrowed as he said it, his voice laden with scorn.

"Coming, Ma'sao," the young guard said. He caught up with his comrade, who held Jespar's gaze a bit longer, then scoffed, turned, and marched after the escort at a brisk pace. Jespar blinked, once, twice, then he slowly resumed walking.

While the hatred in the guard's voice had taken him by surprise, it made perfect sense. Several hundred guards had stayed behind to defend the ziggurat to their last drop of blood. Even for the old soldier, chances were high the blasting powder would ensure he'd never live to see that alcove awaiting at the end of the escape tunnel. But Jespar? To the guard, who knew nothing about the parasite, Jespar was just an outsider rich or influential enough to spend his time with a magnate, an outsider who would live while his comrades would die.

Of course, all this was just a theory. Perhaps Jespar had simply misread the man's expression; perhaps he'd simply been in a foul mood, which was understandable considering his country had just fallen and he was about to risk his own life. Also, why did some old man's misconstrued opinion of him matter anyway? Jespar was headed straight into an eternal nightmare, where frowning guards were the least of his worries.

And yet, somehow, it did matter. His words had left an echo, a bitter feeling in Jespar's chest that resonated with something on a far deeper level, and it was the first of the three blows that would cause Jespar to do what he would do just a few minutes later.

The second blow were the animals. He knew they were dead, he knew why they were here, but still, with every step he walked, a shapeless horror grew inside him.

Hulls.

They were hulls, creatures rid not only of their souls but of all that had once made them alive—hearts, lungs, livers, blood—reduced to grotesque simulacra designed to fool the onlooker into believing they were alive.

Jespar's breath shortened, sweat gathered on his forehead. Both sides of his face felt hot, as if the stuffed animals were looking at him from their dead, fake, glass ball eyes.

Walk faster, he thought, keeping his eyes on the ground.

You're losing them.

But, for some strange reason, he didn't. Perhaps because the fear paralyzed him. Perhaps because his mind, slowly moving toward his final seizure, had tampered with the control he had over his own muscles. Perhaps because some dark part of his subconsciousness already knew what he was about to do.

He walked in silence, the escort moving farther and farther away from him. The two rear guards either didn't notice or didn't care.

That's when the third blow happened.

The parasite spoke to him. Not with words, not with sensations. All the dream-eater did was send him an image.

Jespar, in front of a beautiful door.

Golden ornaments on the frame, the handles shaped like lion's heads.

Behind it, a presence.

One he knew well. One he'd known since that day twelve years ago. One he'd felt in the ziggurat bath, sleeping curled up to Lysia, in the magnate's chamber just an hour ago, even before its owner had manifested.

He *was waiting for him.*

They were.

And this time, Jespar was coming to stay.

The vision ended.

Just a fantasy, Jespar observed himself think. *You're tired, you're terrified, you're unstable.* Only that it wasn't, and he knew it. He simply knew what he had witnessed was

the dream-eater's doing, a glimpse into the world it had prepared for him and would take him to once it finally hatched.

Soon, the image seemed to say.

Soon.

His head felt cold. He stopped, his knees buckled. Hot tears streamed down the corners of his eyes.

Don't.

Move!

But he couldn't. His legs simply refused to move.

There he had it, crystal clear: He—Jespar Dal'Varek, mercenary, drunkard, coward—was going to die.

Because that's what it was if you left aside the wishful thinking, wasn't it?

Even if Lysia carried him, even if the escort made it to the alcove, even if the Scythe weren't waiting at the exit, what were the true odds of them finding the culprit? What if it had been someone from the Scythe after all—the White Sister, perhaps? What if it had been one of the other five magnates, who were now all dead as doornails or about to be hanged by the Scythe?

What if it was some nobody long gone from the island?

Enkshi, deceased, had said it himself: Oonai had more enemies than one could count, and even if someone somehow sometime managed to find out who it was and convinced them, it could be weeks, moons, years until it happened.

In reality.

In dreams, as their trip into Vel'Nyx's mind had proved, an hour in *akhara* could mean six hours in *tuewa.*

One hour, six hours.

One month, six months?

Or more?

By the time the others, *if* they got lucky, found him, he'd have spent half a lifetime in that nightmare.

He’d be insane.

Slowly, the light cast by the escort faded as they one by one passed through the doorway at the opposite side of the room. No one had noticed Jespar was missing. A minute later, they were all gone.

Jespar turned left and vanished between the exhibits.

Chapter 23

Charcoal and Rose

JESPAR STRAYED THROUGH THE DARKNESS, dead animals forming the walls of a seemingly endless maze. He walked and walked, arbitrarily taking turns until he had lost all sense of orientation.

Abruptly, he stopped, holding his breath and listening.

What did he hope to hear?

Alarmed voices, perhaps. Footfalls. Lysia or Kawu, shouting his name.

But there was nothing—just him and the puppet creatures, corpses emptied and propped and frozen to maintain an illusion of life.

Briefly, horror flooded him. What the hell had he done? He had no idea where he was, had no torch, no map, nothing. Even if he did, the escort would have already reached the tunnel by now, closed the secret door behind him, his only means—

The panic vanished. He didn't know why. One moment, he'd been on the verge of a breakdown and the next, he felt—

Yes, how?

Hollow.

With a strange sound both groan and chuckle, he stumbled to the first exhibit he could find—some horse and dog mongrel—and sunk down onto the pedestal.

For a while, he just sat there, gazing into the maze of animals. Then he took his pipe from his hip pouch, along with a firetwig, a small, round tin of tyenite, and some crumpled nightflower leaves. Mechanically, he stuffed the chamber and placed it on the stone beside him, next to the twig. He untethered his water flask from his belt—filled with banana brandy he'd taken from Ma'saa Oonai's study an hour ago—and emptied it in one, long draw. It burnt like hellfire and his stomach revolted, but somehow, he

managed to keep it down. Once the gag reflex subsided, he let the aftertaste unfold in his mouth.

Good stuff.

Not his favorite flavor—too sweet—but good stuff and probably priced at a fortune per bottle. Maybe that was the silver lining. He was dying, but the liquor was good.

He unscrewed the tin, dipped the tip of his right thumb into the black tyenite powder, then held the firetwig with his left and sharply flicked his right thumbnail across one of the pouch-like bulges on the wood.

The resin inside connected with the tyenite on his thumb and ignited the twig in a blaze that momentarily lit his surroundings. Across from him was a colossal beetle, as big as a carriage, with a shiny brown carapace and a disproportionately small head with too many eyes and feelers. Normally, the sight would have scared him; now, he just watched it, the burning firetwig casting a dancing pattern of light and shadow.

Awfully fitting.

He watched the twig burn until it was halfway down to his hand, then lit the pipe with it and tossed the twig into the darkness where the flame danced on a bit longer before dying out.

His first drag was deep, so deep it almost made him cough. He waited, feeling the purple smoke fill his lungs. Sweat beaded in his neck, stars formed before his eyes. His face felt hot, and his stomach filled with acid.

Closing his eyes, he exhaled.

Booze and drogae.

Not the most poetic way to go out, but there were worse. Breaking one's neck by slipping on the stairs to the throne dais, as one of the Qyranian queens had, or jellyfish poison on the latrine seat, the rumored cause of death of the Holy Order's third grandmaster.

He glanced up at the dog-horse looming over him. It pranced on its hind legs, baring its dagger-like teeth, probably in a last gesture of defiance.

Didn't work out for either of us.

He made that groan-chuckle again, then took another drag, this time holding the smoke in for as long as he could.

Then another.

And another.

When the chamber was all ashes, he felt dizzy and slightly nauseous, his mind clouded and the darkness around him morphing and shifting like boiling tar. Slowly, he put down the pipe by his side and drew his dagger. He turned it in his hand. It was a good knife, barely rusted despite years of use. Judging by the size of her cuts, the one *she* had used that night had been similar.

Curiously, that hollowness he had felt when he found her that day wasn't too different from how he felt now. Eight years, but he still remembered it all: how the window had been open, that cheerful lute melody from a street musician wafting into the room. How that stuffed toy horse of hers had stood on the night table with its face turned away from the bed, as if she hadn't wanted it to see what she was about to do.

How pale she'd been.

Just like now, he hadn't screamed or cried, hadn't theatrically dropped to his knees to curse or appeal to the Gods.

Only emptiness.

Emptiness, then rationalizations, silly attempts made by his mind to interpret what he saw as anything other than what it was.

Her blood was wine stains.

Her eyes were shut because she was sleeping.

Her lips were blue because she was ill.

All those years, Jespar had attributed the lack of emotion back then to shock, a natural reaction to prevent a breakdown. Maybe, it had been. Now he thought that maybe, the reason had been altogether different.

Maybe he just didn't care.

Hadn't that always been what his father scolded him for? For being selfish, for being a coward, for taking to his heels when things got rough?

Carefully, Jespar ran his thumb along the dagger's edge. It was still as sharp as it had been when he'd killed the two Scythes from the ambush, as sharp as it had been when he'd used it to slice the throats of the thugs on Yuva. Five lives ended by his hand. Though he was by no means a blade master, he'd always had a natural affinity to them. Perhaps that had also been the true reason for joining the Gallowmen.

But you didn't know.

You didn't know!

Really? Hadn't something like what happened in that village been inevitable? Hadn't he known?

Hadn't he joined them because, deep down, killing was the only thing that selfish coward Jespar Dal'Varek was truly good at?

You're brave, Lysia had said. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had told him this. And it was true—when he'd decided to sacrifice himself to save Kawu's life, he'd meant it. He didn't know where that sudden spurt of heroism had come from, but it didn't matter. What was one selfless act after a life like his?

Maybe there would be a way to frame *this* as heroism too. He could leave a note, telling Lysia and Kawu, should they ever find him, that he hadn't wanted to be a burden, that he hadn't wanted to put the two of them at risk chasing that phantom of hope, which, in truth, had been a mirage to begin with. Of course, that would also be a lie. He was here because he *couldn't* take it.

Yes, maybe a greater man might have. Maybe a greater man would have sat through months or years of getting skinned alive by his father; maybe a greater man would have taken a chance, slim as it may be, over no chance at all.

But that man wasn't him.

He pressed his eyes shut and fought the rising nausea. His hand shook, trails of sweat running down his face.

You were right, father.

I'm a coward.

***

The tip of the blade touched his neck when a hand shot out of the dark and gripped his wrist. For a heartbeat, Jespar stared at it. Then he groaned and clutched the dagger with his free hand, yanking it towards his throat. Pointless—the grip was unyielding. Someone said something but he didn't hear it, only pulled harder, cursing, struggling, kicking at his attacker.

Suddenly, a red light flared up before his eyes and all strength left his muscles. His fingers uncurled from the hilt, his feet dropped to the floor, and he sagged back against the animal. The hand tossed the dagger into the darkness. There was a thud. Then the clatter of iron on stone.

"Stupid boy," a man said. "Stupid, cowardly boy."

He sunk to his haunches, his face coming level with Jespar's. Agaam's eye-patch was bloodstained, as was the lower half of his beard. A piece of cloth was wrapped around his left shoulder, soaked dark red on chest level. His hair hung loose into his forehead in greasy strands.

Agaam held Jespar's stare, his good eye unmoving. "Stupid boy. Do you have any idea what would happen?"

He didn't answer. The battle fervor still coursed through his veins, his hands shaking, his breath shallow.

"The boy and the woman would blame themselves for the rest of their lives."

And, just like that, something broke.

It wasn't true that he had felt nothing, nor was it true that he didn't care. These were just the lies the narrator told him, both in his nightmares and when he was awake, over and over, drilling a poisoned nail into his skull until the hole had healed and he believed it had belonged there all along.

Yes. When he'd found *her*, he just stared, then gone back downstairs and told a servant. Yes, he'd done the same back when they had found the burning manor—stares, emptiness, running.

But both times, the pain *had* come. It had come but days later, hitting him with the force of a flood crashing against an already crumbling wall.

Both times, he'd gone somewhere in the wilderness where he was alone. Both times, he'd done the same he did now.

Clenched his fists, closed his eyes, and screamed.

It was a scream that held it all. Pain and panic. Fear and fury. Helplessness and horror.

He hadn't asked for this. He hadn't asked to be born to a father who despised him, hadn't asked to see him and his brothers flayed on those crosses, hadn't asked to find his sister on those bloodstained sheets because she couldn't take it, hadn't asked for that *fucking bug* in his brain which was about to turn him into a puppet.

The scream must have gone on for some time. When Jespar came back to his senses, Agaam sat on the pedestal across from him, hands folded in his lap.

"I think we should talk."

Interlude

One-Hundred Sixty Days Before

EARLY MORNING, one of the many hallways of the manor. Sunlight filters through the grated windows, illuminating the specks of dust dancing between the alabaster walls. It's the first day of Drought, and also the first time the Man sees the Girl. She's in the library, dusting off tomes, then carefully applying oil to the ledgers with a brush and putting them back into their rows.

There's nothing special about her. She's fragile. Young. Cream-colored skin, a bit too skinny. Everything about her is pointy: her bones, her nose, her lips, the nipples that shine through underneath her just-expensive-enough-not-to-seem-cheap silk tunic. She seems to be lost in thought, eyes following the movements of her hands, but lost in her ruminations. She's not aware of the Man standing in the door and watching her.

Nothing special, but she'll do.

He crosses the room in brisk steps and presses his lips onto hers, pushing her against the bookshelf with one arm, and pressing his other between her thighs. Her lips are chapped; her perfume smells rosy. A prickle spreads in his chest, then in his groin. *Better than you thought.*

Pain shoots through his mouth.

Gasping, he breaks from her. He touches his lip. Blood sticks to his fingers.

She bit you.

Confusion turns into disbelief, disbelief into anger, but, for some reason, he doesn't slap her as he might have done otherwise. He just stands there, staring, the trail of blood trickling into his beard.

"How dare you?" the Man manages at last, but his voice lacks his normal power.

No effect. The Girl holds his gaze, one arm across her chest, the other half extended, as if trying to keep him away. “How dare *I*? Saaras’jodule, what’s wrong with you? Who the hell are you?”

Blood rushes to the Man’s cheeks. “I—”

“Get the *fuck* out of here, or I’ll tell the head servant. The master arrives tomorrow, and he’ll have you whipped to the bone for this.”

Things fall into place.

She doesn’t know.

The Man opens his mouth. Closes it. It makes sense—he wasn’t supposed to arrive until tomorrow, and, with his hair tied back and without his beard rings, his semblance to the statues all over the city isn’t that obvious.

“Are you deaf?” the Girl says, jaw set.

The Man hesitates. Then—he doesn’t understand why—he bows his head and withdraws. Halfway through the corridor, he hears the door slam shut.

The same afternoon, the Third Magnate arrives. The Man and she spend the evening in the orchard, discussing the last details of their plan. But the Man isn’t really there, not tonight—like moths drawn to light, his thoughts always return to the encounter his morning. The girl’s pointy nose. Her chapped but soft lips. That unfiltered hatred no one has dared to show him in a long, long time.

That smell of roses.

A ruckus pulls him out of his ruminations. Muffled voices come from the manor entrance, a man and a woman. Making a hasty excuse to the Third Magnate that would have been more appropriate for a servant, he hastens across the courtyard fronting the manor. The voices grow loud, and now he recognizes them both. A strange, almost childish excitement overcomes him.

In the lobby stand the Girl and the head servant, right before the fountain crowned by a statue depicting the Man’s likeness. The Girl has a knapsack slung over her shoulder and is dressed in travel clothes—shin-high boots, loose linen trousers, and a tunic, with long sleeves for protection against bloodsucking insects. The head holds her wrist as she tries

to break from him, cursing and hurling insults. When they notice the Man standing in the doorway, they freeze.

The Man opens his mouth to speak, but then the Girl's eyes meet his and he falters. Though she veils it, she radiates that same hatred. He clears his throat. "What's going on here?"

A flicker of the fear—the Man knows all too well—passes over the Girl's face. Then, her voice clear and firm, she says, "I'm leaving."

"No, you're not." The head servant speaks in that silly, shrill voice that always vexes the Man. Why does he keep him employed? "Your contract obliges you to—"

The Girl scowls. "I'm *leaving*!"

Somehow, the Man can't help but smile. "You actually had no idea who I am. Did you?"

The head servant winces, as if by saying these words the Man had just issued a death sentence. A strange melancholy overcomes the Man, strange because it's in equal parts depressing and amusing.

They fear me.

Hardly a groundbreaking realization. And yet, it never made him feel this way.

"I just want to go," the Girl repeats, arms crossed. Her voice still has that firmness, but the way her eyes dart about the room and how she bites her lip gives away her nervousness.

Of course, the Man thinks. Yesterday, she took him for a pervert trying to harass a servant.

Now he's a *powerful* pervert.

He bursts into laughter.

It's liberating, riotous, a laughter his ears aren't used to anymore. The head servant and the Girl look at him in disbelief, the way you'd look at someone about to draw a war axe and go on a rampage. For some reason, this only makes it funnier.

When the laughter dies down at last, he approaches the Girl. She tenses, taking a step back.

The Man bows his head. “I’m sorry.”

Silence follows.

“I’m sorry for what I did yesterday—it was wrong and vile, and there’s no excuse for it. Still, I’d like you to stay. Please.”

The head servant’s jaw falls open. He looks at the Girl, then at the Man, then at his feet. When the Girl answers at last, all she says his, “I don’t know.”

But she stays.

Not out of affection, of course. From the head servant, the Man learns she comes from a middle-class Coalition family and plans to travel to Qyra to study alchemy and herbalism at the Xagasha University in Al-Rashim, the most renowned for natural sciences in the Civilized World—unfortunately, also the most expensive. The Man is impressed to hear she amassed the lion’s share of the funds for this endeavor herself; her two moons’ work at the manor are the home stretch.

She needs the money.

The Girl doesn’t accept his invitation to dinner until five days later, but when she does, the Man enjoys himself more than he has in a long, long time. It’s not that they get along so well—were someone to observe them as they dine on Arazealean oysters, Nehrimese caviar, and Qyranian starfruit, that person would probably feel the air get colder. The Girl smiles at the right places, says the right words, and gives just enough information for her reservation not to become overtly morose, but it’s painfully obvious that behind the veneer hides hatred. While the reason she hasn’t left the manor is money, the Man believes her accepting his invitation has three reasons. One, obligation: The Man pays extremely well, and though she clearly still despises him, her contract clearly makes him her superior. Sure, she can still beat feet whenever she wants—the Man made that part clear to the head servant—but as long as she decides to continue working here, she works for him, and you wouldn’t want to displease your employer. Two, convenience: Each meal they eat is worth a worker’s pay for the month, each wine twice as much. Luxury has its own magic. And, three, admiration—a twisted, paradoxical kind of admiration. She loathes the part she met in the library, and is probably familiar enough with him to

know he's no saint, but as an ambitious Kiléan woman from a Coalition family, she respects his accomplishments. Because ambitious, she is. That part the Man feels as clearly as he feels his fascination for her. She has that fire, that ambition, that verve that had driven the Man to the top.

Hatred, pragmatism, admiration. He likes it. Ever since reaching the end of Fortune Road, everyone he meets wants something from him. Money, affection, influence. His downfall. The only exceptions are his wife and his friend and counselor, but even their lives revolve around him. Not the Girl, though. Even now that she knows who he is, she wants nothing from him that goes beyond the contract. Yuz, she admires his success, but merely on an intellectual level—there's no swooning, no sycophancy, no idolization. Having noted he doesn't mind, she even criticizes him. In many ways, the Man realizes, she reminds him of the girls he had been courting back when he was still just a young fisherman's son with nothing to proffer but his wit and ambition.

It's invigorating.

He fucked countless women since his marriage, but none of these affairs ever rivaled his marriage—it was about sex, nothing more and nothing less. Not that anyone else understands that part, of course; the servants look away, but he's aware of the whispers, and even his friend, whom he trusts with his life, hadn't been able to suppress a frown when the Man first confided in him.

Is it really so hard to fathom?

He loves his wife and he will always love her, no matter how many pretty servant girls, Coalition careerists, or lonely noblewomen offer themselves to him, thinking they can win a special place in his heart if only they suck his cock well enough.

And her? the Man thinks, as he finds himself watching the Girl from afar helping the head servant with accounting work. They're having dinner again tonight, but he just had to see her. She wears her hair down today, disregarding protocol. Last dinner, she'd done the same and he'd told her it suits her—could that be the reason? "No," he mutters. His comment only earned him a raised eyebrow, though the Man afterward tried to convince himself there'd been the hint of a smile at her lips. The Girl wears her hair down because

she wants to, and probably also because she knows she doesn't have to fear repercussions.

Brazen, he thinks, but smiles.

She's nothing like those cheap gold miners.

The Girl is different, untarnished, free in a way he would never have expected anyone to feel, let alone act, in his presence. He is the man at the top, the Big Dreamer, a god. And yet here he is, watching her, craving her, like a starstruck boy. Is he trying to boil the ocean? Perhaps. Admiration and, probably, convenience aside, the Girl simply doesn't like him. He'll never win her affection, especially not after what he did.

But he does.

He finds it slowly, like some fossil encased in ice, whose layers must be chiseled off with patience and care lest he irrevocably damage its shell. The Man never touches her during their courting, he doesn't make inappropriate remarks, and once he realizes the witty monologues he's known for bore her to tears, he begins to listen.

When was the last time he has truly done that?

The Girl's story and soul is as complex and intriguing as her free spirit and those hazel eyes she always lines with charcoal suggest. Her mother is a low-ranking official in the Coalition. Her father is a former cloth merchant who died of a heart attack two weeks before her birth. She attended a reputable school on Teenos, barely covered by the modest inheritance and her mother's salary, and excelled in science and mathematics.

She shares all this reluctantly, but she *does* share, and every dinner he uncovers a new facet within the reticent conversation, tiny as the facet may be. As it turns out, the head servant was wrong about the funds for her endeavor to study in Qyra—she saved up all that money herself, from the first caya. How? Through a little enterprise.

When she's done explaining—it's the third week of Drought and their seventh dinner—the Man chuckles. "You sold the nobles potions that stop aging?"

"Slow it," the Girl says, raising her index finger. "Wrinkles, graying, hair loss, you name it."

"And? Do these miracle elixirs work?"

"Of course they do. Do I look like a fraud?" the Girl answers with a cautious smile.

The Man chuckles again. For that short moment, the contempt hiding in her eyes is almost gone. At last, he shakes his head. "Scams aren't a reliable investment. They blow up eventually, and you know that."

The Girl shrugs. "I guess I do."

Silence draws out between them. It's past midnight, and the flame of the burnt-down candle between them reflects in the Girl's gold-plated goblet. The Man drinks from his own, then pensively traces the rim of the goblet with his thumb. "You probably think I'm a monster."

"What makes you think that?"

The Man smiles wanly. "I'd be worried about your self-respect if you didn't."

Did he really just say that?

The Girl blinks, then studies the contents of her goblet, swirling the wine in slow circles. "Actually, I don't believe in 'monsters.'"

"Then you're either very idealistic or very naïve."

"Or, maybe, you have a very simple-minded view of people." There's a slight slur in her voice. "What I believe in are monstrous actions. We are so obsessed with labels and categories, as if there's that, I don't know, mystical scale in us that tilts one way or the other and either makes us a saint or a monster. If a person kills someone and then saves ten others, is that person still a monster?"

"Depends on who you ask, I suppose."

"Right, and these people are probably going to argue about it all day long. Why did that murder happen? Were those people saved out of selfishness or altruism? In the end, what does it matter? One person is dead, ten are alive, and all we should care about is whether that monster-saint is going to continue murdering or saving people and maybe even wonder why he became a murderer in the first place instead of going out of our ways to dish out judgment." She empties her wine. "Actions and footprints, that's what matters."

That faraway look in her eyes disappears, and her eyes lock with his. “And, frankly, Ma’sao Oonai, yours are ugly.”

It’s that night that the Man finally falls in love with her.

In the coming week, more dinners, more walks, and more luncheons pass, and, at last, the Man feels the Girl’s contempt fade. The stares come less often. The smiles more.

On the fourth week, the Man at last sits down to write his wife. Usually, they exchange letters at least once a week, and he has only written her once, shortly after meeting the Girl. He spends twenty minutes sorting the clutter on his desk and adjusting his chair. Then he carefully places a blank parchment before him, takes a quill, smooths the feathers, and dips it into the inkwell.

He stares at the paper.

Guilt.

That’s what he feels. For the first time in thirty-two years of marriage, he feels guilty.

Because this is more than sex, he thinks. *Because you’re mad for the Girl.*

Because he’s cheating.

He chokes out the thought and starts to write. How is she? Sorry for the delay, too much work. Yuz, he knows, he’s here to relax, but she knows how he is, and so on and so forth. Lying by omission. Hastily, he signs, seals, and sends the letter via mounted courier and kills it from his memory.

Three days later, he decides it’s time to make a move. He can’t stand it anymore: seeing her every day, watching her full lips as she speaks, remembering how they felt on his. They meet in the orchard where she waits beneath an arch of wisteria, her back facing him, wearing a pale yellow dress with the shoulders exposed, looking spectacular on her tanned skin. They stroll through the hedge maze for a while, then sit down in one of the benches of the many maze islands. As if sensing his intentions, she seats herself just a bit closer to the Man than a friend might have. Amid the sounds of tropical dusk, they continue talking for a while, the Man’s throat dry with anticipation.

Do it, he thinks.

Kiss her.

But he can't. He, the wealthiest man in the Civilized World, can't muster the courage. Instead, after an eternity of meaningless conversation, he slides his hand over hers, his fingertips brushing over her knuckles. She tenses but doesn't withdraw.

At least not immediately.

When she does, his heart sinks. She turns to face him, her eyes narrowed.

"How?"

"What do you mean?"

"How is this supposed to work? Saaras'jodule, you have a wife, and I'm almost thirty years younger than you. I shouldn't be doing this." She scoffs. "Let alone enjoy it."

"I don't love her anymore," he says. The words slip from his tongue before he knows it. But even though a hot stab of guilt follows right after, he feels they are true. Softly, he repeats them. "I don't love her anymore."

The Girl laughs, but it sounds sad. "What, and you think that's an argument in your favor? Gods, you're so damned detached from this world. Do you think I don't know how this works? You and your 'dalliances'?" She shakes her head, her wavy hair brushing her exposed shoulders. "You use them until they bore you, then send them back in a sobbing heap, crushed under a million 'agreements' that make speaking out against you suicide." His expression must have betrayed his hurt, because the Girl rolls her eyes. "Oh, come on, did you honestly expect me to ignore that part? Yuz, I do like you, hell knows why, but that doesn't mean I'm just going to ignore your history."

"This is different," the Man says. His words sound feeble, frail. "You're different."

"Sure." An empty smiles tugs at her mouth. "Remember that conversation we had, about monsters and saints?"

"I—"

"I said that, in the end, all that matters is how a person decides to act in the future. And I hate to break it to you, but after decades of cheating and breaking women who were gullible enough to let your fancy beard rings impress them *and* your history and reputation, only an idiot would assume I'd be the exception. I'd be worried about my self-respect if I did."

To the Man's surprise, her words make him neither angry nor sad. Why would they? She's right, and he knows it. Eat or get eaten? Chances, not obstacles? His entire life is a sequence of carefully crafted excuses the rational part of his mind forged to appease its emotional brother, who knows that underneath it all lies a truth much simpler: He simply likes to put himself first.

His universe revolves around him.

Unable to hold her gaze, he looks at the gravel ground. "But I want to be better."

The Girl snorts. "And you think cheating on your wife with a woman nearly three decades younger than her is a good place to start?"

Suddenly, the Man's silk robes feel heavy on his shoulders, the rings on his fingers tight. His beard itches on his neck. "No. It's terrible."

"But?"

The Man exhales. "But I just don't love her anymore. I love you."

Something in the Girl's charcoal-lined eyes changes, like the fog over a lake clearing for a flicker. Then the hardness is back. "And for how long?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. Even if this *is* different for you, even if you want to 'be better,' how do I know that, two weeks from now, you'll toss me away like all the others?"

"I told you, it won't happen! I've met hundreds of women, and none were like you."

"Hundreds? Impressive."

The Man moans. "I told you, they were just—"

"Prove it."

The Man falls silent.

"Prove it," the Girl repeats. "If you're serious about all this, tell your wife what you just told me. That you don't love her anymore and that you love me."

"But—"

"No buts." The Girl stands. Mechanically, she smooths her dress. "I'm not going to be just another one of your conquests, so if what you just said is more than empty talk, then

tell your wife that you moved on." She shakes her head, tugging at the golden necklace she's wearing. A gift by the Man. "It's the least we can do."

And she leaves.

They don't talk for the rest of the day, and the day after. At night, the Man asks her into his chambers. The Girl's eyes are bloodshot and she looks exhausted.

"So?" she asks as she pushes the door shut behind them. The Man sits on the edge of the bed, in white robes and barefoot, his hair hanging to his shoulders. He wears no jewelry.

"I wrote her a letter."

The Girl folds her arms, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. "What did you tell her?"

"That I met someone and fell in love with her. And that it's over."

She snorts, frowning, but her eyes don't leave his. "What a charming man you are."

The Man's gut tingles. He stands, stepping toward her. Gods, how he wants her, like a shipwrecked clinging to flotsam, every corner of his body craving for water.

"So?" he asks.

"I don't know," she says, uncrossing her arms and averting her eyes. "I think this is a bad idea."

The Man gives a desperate sigh. "What else do you want me to do? I—"

She kisses him.

It's all he thought it would be.

Entrancing.

Absorbing.

Devouring.

But while the primal part of him goes mad, the Man understands something the moment their tongues touch: that this wouldn't end well. Yuz, he's shipwrecked, yuz, her saliva is the liquor he craves. But it's salt water.

He cups her neck, pulls her close, drinks her scent, kisses harder, blood shooting into his head and his groin. Her hands shake as she unbuttons his robe, her breath warm on his

face. They move on to the bed, now naked, and then he's inside her, thrusting, his lips on hers, tasting her sweat, one hand propped onto the sheets, the other around her neck and pulling her closer, closer, *closer*.

Neither of them lasts long.

For some heartbeats, they don't move, savoring the afterglow, their breathing fast and shallow. Then the Man chuckles; the Girl joins in. It's not long until they do it again. After the third time, a thought passes through that hypnotic bubble they've trapped each other in. He tells her. She grins and fishes an empty little flacon from her dress lying rumpled at the bedside. Bitterleaf.

He's relieved, though he wonders why. An heir. All those years, he wanted one so much, until he at last came to terms with the idea of remaining childless. And now, the thought is back, resurrected by that strange woman in his arms, that woman he has known for barely a month. *Later*, he thinks, as they lie back down, her back pressed up against him. He trails his hand through the Girl's hair. Not a strand of gray.

I didn't lie.

He did write the letter. He just didn't send it.

The remaining three weeks in the Manor go by in feverish dream. He meets with the Third Magnate, but his thoughts are often elsewhere, much to the Third Magnate's annoyance, who leaves three days early, telling him they'll resume when his mind is clear. He doesn't care. The Plan, his empire, his palace. It all seems part of a distant life fading further into obscurity with every day he spends with *her*. Though the sex and intimacy add a new layer to their relationship, this layer doesn't overshadow the rest. They talk, laugh, play chess and *khaasa*, a Qyranian card game he teaches her. In secret, he sends a letter to the First Circle Scholar of the Xagasha University, whom he met on a business-related journey to Qyra years ago. Though the Girl refused his offer to pay for her journey and tuition, he knows how selective the university scholars are concerning the admittance of students. She's too proud to let him help, fair enough. But he'll be damned if he doesn't at least improve her chances.

Ever since that first night with the Girl, he writes the letters to his wife on time. They are extensive, full of questions and irrelevant details. He only skims through his wife's replies, gathering enough to address their content in his answers. Every time he finishes a letter, he folds and seals it before the ink is dry.

One evening, the Man surprises the Girl by bringing in a clan of Aeterna gleepeople, musicians, jugglers, and dancers from a nearby village. It's a long, entertaining night that takes a curious turn as a diffuse, sexual tension develops with every emptied pitcher and ends with the Man and the Girl taking well-built an Aeterna dancer into the sleeping chambers with them. The Man doesn't care for the dancer, but somehow the sight of her kissing and, later, riding him, fills him with a twisted arousal that feeds in equal parts off jealousy and desire.

And still—when the dancer leaves the manor at dawn, he's relieved. If this experiment showed him anything, it's that he wants the Girl for himself.

Wants?

Or needs?

The first time he asks himself this is during a round of *khaasa* some days later. Touching his lip with one of the cards, he watches her brood over the next turn.

It's strange.

He still craves her, wants her near; judging by the way she acts, she feels the same. And yet, he has noticed a peculiar hollowness in the pit of his stomach each time they see each other that's particularly present after sex. He remembers their first kiss.

Salt water.

You drink and drink and drink, but it never quenches your thirst. He pushes the thought aside, but it comes back again and again, like a stubborn bloodfly. Even in the early days of his marriage, he never felt that *need* to be with his wife. Sure, he missed her, but this? Just one hour without seeing her, and he gets nervous. Just one evening without sex and he retreats into his room and masturbates thinking about her.

Who is he, an addict?

A dog, slave to its urges?

And thus, the fights begin.

They start out as playful mockery, but soon turn into arguments. She finds out about his letter to the university scholar and complains about him disregarding her explicit wish not to get involved. He calls her irrational, tells her she won't stand a chance without a good word from him. She says she wants to write her own story, not be a footnote in his. The discussion ends in sex, but it's only the beginning. Politics, philosophy, personal matters—somehow, every topic is enough to set him off. He grows annoyed with her, her know-it-all attitude that has no accomplishments to back them up—*beauty potions, really?*—her brazen criticisms of the Man's decisions which can only come from the mouth of someone who doesn't understand the first thing about the mechanisms of leadership and power.

Salt water.

One night he awakes, his arm wrapped tight around the Girl's bony body, like a beggar clinging on to the last crust of bread.

She'll kill you, he realizes.

If this keeps on, it'll drive him insane.

Suddenly, he longs for his wife. He imagines her, her warm eyes that couldn't hurt a soul, those tiny wrinkles around them, the way she always touches her nose when lost in thought.

I don't love her anymore.

Was that really him speaking?

Why? Why would he say something like that?

Yuz, their marriage lacks the passion he shares with the Girl, but his wife was always there for him, always by his side, always trusting the good in him that, these days, few people see. Whenever there was a throwback, she grounded him, picked him up, nursed him back to health, and her ideas and counsel had been deciding factors in the rise of his empire. If he's shipwrecked, then she *is* the flotsam.

His stomach cramps. He feels sick. He slips out from under the sheets, careful not to wake the Girl. Then he goes for a walk and doesn't return until the early morning hours.

As the thoughts about his wife come more often, his fights with the Girl intensify, who is growing more and more vicious realizing she's losing him. He pushes her away. She clings on tighter.

On the last day of his seven-week sojourn in the manor, he ends it. Everything he said, everything they did, every time they slept together—by now, the thought sickens him. Did he seriously consider giving up his wife for this naïve twenty-something with nothing to proffer but hubris?

Now that his mind is set, the anger is gone, leaving a hollow, determined calm.

He asks her for a walk through the hedge maze, to which she hesitantly agrees. Probably thanks to the Man's anger having disappeared, it's a surprisingly pleasant experience. They talk and laugh, carefree and cheerful, almost like in the early days of their romance. It goes so well that a cloud of doubt overcomes him when they sit down on the stone bench. It's the very same one where he, weeks ago, told her he wants to be better.

But isn't that what he's doing?

No more cheating. No more lies. By dragging him into that feverish dream, the Girl had inadvertently helped him realize that it's his wife he truly wants. *And you'll tell her*, he thinks. He'll tell her about his unfaithfulness, he'll beg for her forgiveness, and if she cannot give it, then so be it.

Either way—this is the first step.

The Girl studies him with her hazel eyes, a faint smile tugging at the corner of her mouth, probably thinking this is the end of their arguments and the return to the "old days." *She's beautiful*, the Man thinks. Beautiful, strong, smart, passionate.

And salt water.

He takes a deep breath and makes his case. She's too young; he's too old. Their relationship will spark gossip among the nobility, which will harm her career more than his. Even if it's not true, she'll be forever remembered as a woman who slept her way up. Write your own story, don't be a footnote.

Of course, he knows none of these arguments will convince her or even soften the blow. Not just because her love for him has only gotten more intense as his had faded, but because in the end his arguments are a pile of horse-shit. The only reason they are having this conversation is because he changed his mind.

When he's done talking, she still studies him, though the smile is gone. "I thought you wanted to be better."

"I do," the Man says. "And this is where I start."

The Girl scoffs. "Meaning you'll undoubtedly revoke that horrible decree you're planning to issue, doesn't it? What was it called? 'Golden Earth'?"

The Man rolls his eyes. "This isn't about politics, this is about us."

"Mm-hm."

When she says nothing else, the Man puts a hand on her shoulder and leans slightly forward. "Vaota—"

"Don't call me that."

The Man sighs. "You've got to understand that this isn't meant to be. I have a wife, I have a life, and you got yours ahead of—"

"You're bored of me," the Girl says. "That's what it comes down to, isn't it? You're bored of me and now you toss me away, just as I said you would."

The Man withdraws his arm, frowning. "I never said I'm bored of you."

"But it's what you feel." Her voice is flat. "You fucked me, and now, you're bored of me, just as I said you would be. I'm just another entry on your list of conquered cunts." She makes a noise that should have probably been a laugh, but it comes out as a sob. "Gods, how could I be so stupid? I knew this would happen, and still I did it, how could I be so *fucking* stupid?"

Perplexed by that vulgarity which is unlike her, the Man blinks. He tries to think of an answer, but nothing comes to mind.

"Just say it," the Girl says. Though her face still upholds the veneer of composure, her voice trembles and her right eye glistens with tears. "Just fucking say it, and be done with it. I can take it."

"I—"

"*Say it!*"

He snaps. "All right! Saaras'jodule, you want the truth? You annoy me! You annoy me, you smother me, you bore me, you make me uneasy! I just don't *like you*!" His breath is heavy, his cheeks flushed.

For a moment, she just stares at him. Then she makes that noise again, half-laugh, half-sob. "You said you loved me."

The Man exhales, running an angry hand through his hair. "Yuz, and I thought I did. But this… it wasn't love, it was self-destruction. You're destructive, and I just can't take it anymore. I'm sorry."

Her dignity lasted for a heartbeat longer. Then, as if he'd driven a spear right through her stomach, she sags forward, flings her arms around her arms and starts to cry, the charcoal turning runny at her tears and trickling down her cheeks in black rivulets. "I hate you," she sobs. "Saaras'jodule, I hate you so much."

Awkwardly, he reaches out to touch her shoulder, but she slaps his hand away. "You know what?" she says between her sobs. "I was wrong, monsters exist. You're one of them."

And she runs away.

For a while, the Man just sits there, motionless like a wood figure. To his own surprise, he feels nothing.

Interlude

The Day

DOWN IN THE CITY, the temple bells strike midnight. If one listens closely, their ringing can be heard even far up on the mountain, at the end of Fortune Road. The ringing that proclaims the terminus of one day and the genesis of another. The Man doesn't hear; he's in a dream. He doesn't yet know this, but it's the last he'll have in a long time he can claim as his own. In the dream, the Man swims through a sunken ziggurat. It's deserted, rotten, the carpets infested by some virulent underwater growth. Dead sea animals, squids, crabs, and fish float about, their tentacles, carapaces, and scales brushing the Man's skin as he swims past.

He's looking for his wife. Her voice is there, shouting his name, always near and yet sounding so distant—they should be in the same world, but have grown apart. When he at last reaches the top of the pyramid—his livelihood, the proof that he'd been right all along—he hesitates. Then he opens them. A swarm of dead fish burst through the slit, into his face, slimy and skeletal.

The Girl sits on his bed, back propped against the headboard, her skin purple and bloated. Black liquid seeps from her eyes, forming clouds in the water like octopus ink. She's naked, wearing but the Magnate's Crown. Its spikes are all broken.

Resting in her lap lies Popâ, or what's left of him. Lobsters crawl all over his body, nibbling at his rotten skin, one half its length inside Popâ's gaping mouth. There's a hole in his torso, just above waist level, the tips of his ribcage shining through. His hand is a claw clutching a broken bottle of rice wine. The Girl smiles at the Man, running her fingers through his father's seaweed-like hair, pulling out tufts of it with each stroke.

Popâ's eyes snap open.

"Forgive me, son," he says. "Forgive me, for I was wrong."

Tossing and screaming in his bed, the Man doesn't notice the strange clicking noise coming from somewhere in the room, like an insect throwing its body against a glass pane, again and again.

Interlude

One-Hundred Seventeen Days Before

LIFE IS GOOD. No, that's an understatement: life is great. His wife is the woman he loves, not some merchant hopeful with a pretty face and a firm ass. Granted, he had liked the Girl, but a wiser man would have seen they were doomed to fail from the start. His fiery character simply didn't mesh well with someone of equal temperament.

Smiling wanly at his own foolishness, he lifts the curtain of the carriage window and watches the landscape pass by. The manor is far behind him and they'll reach the city by dawn. Now that the plan has been set into motion, he can't wait to get back to the ziggurat—to his wife, to his home. In many ways, he thinks, his fling with the Girl had been a blessing. It helped him set his priorities straight.

No more dalliances.

No more distractions.

No more cheating.

He would come clean to his wife, rekindle his marriage, then watch the plan unfold, which would cement his place in history once and for all. Chances, not obstacles. Ultimately, it was for the best of all Kilé—the Coalition's rule was volatile, unstable, lacking direction. Seven magnates and a bunch of sycophants, all sharing the power? If days of discussions and conferences preceded every single step forward, no wonder you lose the race. There would be none of that under his rule. Legislation would be fast and effective, the fat, greedy bureaucracy abolished, and the country restructured into a place where every Kiléan, regardless of race, sex, and class had their shot at fortune, so long as they worked hard.

Drastic progress needs drastic measures.

The rocking of the carriage and the footfalls of the escort ease him into a pleasant half-sleep.

Is the Girl a liability?

Three days ago, a week after she left, he spent a long time thinking about this. *She's not.* He told the Girl nothing of the plan, and as the Third Magnate had left the manor—when she'd tired of his constant distraction and told him to inform her once he would be done with his "pubescent infatuation"—the Girl had no chance to eavesdrop. Thank Gods his insanity hadn't driven him to sharing even that part with her.

All the Girl could do was make their affair public, and if she did that, she'd be in for a nasty surprise. The servants knew very well that their generous wages were tied to their silence, and the girl's words alone were worth as much as a needle in fighting a colossus. Dozens of women had approached the Coalition with similar stories, intending to incite a scandal, and had left the Jade Hall in sobbing heaps.

No one cared.

He hadn't been elected magnate for moral purity but for his achievements, and most people would do the same in his position and were well aware of that. It's easy to be virtuous when you have no chance but to be.

You're a monster.

The Man frowns, pushes the thought back to where it came from, and drifts off into a restful sleep.

The second day after his return, he surprises his wife with a dinner by moonlight in the orchard, accompanied by music from the country's most renowned harpist. They go for a long walk afterward, talking and laughing like they had in the old days. Afterwards, they have sex for the first time in a year.

She's the flotsam. He sees it now.

Later, the Man thinks as his wife sleeps with her head resting on his chest, cuddled up to him, her eyes moving beneath her eyelids, probably having some strange and wonderful dream like she always had. Unlike him, she rarely has nightmares, because unlike him, she is a good person.

And you'll be better.

Gently, he kisses her forehead and trails his fingers through her hair. There is more gray now, but he doesn't mind. He'll come clean tomorrow. First thing in the morning, he'll tell her everything.

But he doesn't. Not the next morning, not the week after. A moon later, he still hasn't told her anything, and now he understands it's better this way.

It's not as if she hadn't known all along, is it? She'd seen the clues, she'd known when he'd been lying, and she'd chosen to ignore it. So why shame her by telling her she'd been deluding herself?

The plan, on the other hand, is making terrific progress. The decree has been fully ratified and will be effectuated in two moons, on Drought Four, and the two Aeterna lunatics the Third Magnate has unearthed from the city's underworld are doing an awe-inspiring job riling up the commoners.

Things are looking up.

Until the day he gets the letter.

Even before he gets to the signature, the cramped, precise shorthand tells him who sent it. The Girl. She wants to see him, concerning a matter of "great importance." Probably aware that the Man is unlikely to respond to threats, she kept her tone polite and ended the letter with a plea rather than a demand. The Man tears it up and tosses it into the hearth.

The same night, the voice comes back, a little louder than before.

You're a monster.

He manages to suppress it for another week, but by then it has become so loud it makes it hard for him to focus. *Fine,* he thinks, and writes an answer suggesting a meeting place and time.

One day later, he arrives at an abandoned warehouse. It's in the middle of the harbor, the mid-Drought sun turning the city into a feverish vision. Seagulls caw, sailors curse. Waves toss against the stone of the quay.

He instructs his guards to wait outside, then enters.

The Girl looks as pretty as he remembers her. She wears a yellow tunic and, strange for a woman, brown trousers. Her hair is in a ponytail, her eyes free from the charcoal-lining she often had on during their affair.

For a heartbeat, they just look at each other, he in the door, she sitting on a barrel on the opposite side of the room, the dust-speckled air between them. Crates of every shape and size tower along the walls, the din outside marring the silence.

The Man closes the door and crosses the room, sitting down on a crate some steps from her. He has his hair open and rings adorn his beard, which falls on an embroidered, deep blue robe. He chose his attire without thought, but now he's glad he has gone with something impressive rather than inconspicuous. It cements the hierarchy.

"Well?" he asks.

"Thank you for coming," the Girl says. The Man scrunches up an eyebrow. He expected accusations or an emotional outburst.

"I'm very busy."

"Of course you are."

Silence stretches out between them. At last, the Girl sighs. "I'm pregnant."

The Man doesn't reply.

"Hello?"

The Man's stomach contracts. Sweat stings in his neck. "Nonsense. You took bitterleaf."

"Well, it still happened."

"No, that doesn't make sense. You're lying."

The Girl narrows her eyes. "Feel free to stick around and convince yourself my flowerings don't come anymore. It's true, believe it or not, and telling yourself a million times over that it isn't won't make it any different."

Despite the heat, cold creeps down the Man's neck, mixing with the sweat. "Then end it," he says.

"What?"

"End the pregnancy. I'll get us an apothecary, and he'll have it done in a minute. It doesn't even hurt."

"… You're joking," the Girl says, staring at him in disbelief.

"I'm not. Look, there's this medicine you can drink, and it just flushes the thing out. That's how the Qyranians do—"

"Stop it!" The girl's lips tremble, her fists clenched. "Gods, how—how can you even say that? This is a child we're talking about, *our* child, not some, I don't know, some fruit you can pluck from a tree and toss it away because you don't like how it looks. I'm keeping the child, and if you want to stop me from even doing that, you better have one of our leg-breakers kill me right here and right now. Do you understand?"

"I—"

"*Do you understand?*"

The Man swallows hard. *She can't talk to you like that*, he thinks.

You're a god, she's a nobody.

Show her her place.

And yet, that's not how he feels. He feels small, pathetic, exposed, as if his expensive clothes have vanished and his skin gone translucent, opening a window right into his soul. Perhaps it's the heat. Perhaps it's the lack of sleep. Perhaps it's that damned voice in his head that just won't shut up.

You're a monster, you're a monster, you're a monster.

At last, the Man regains his composure. "All right. All right, it's your choice, do what you want."

The Girl watches him silently, her black eyes frozen and wary.

"Question is, what do you want from me? I'm guessing you didn't order me here to break the good news."

The Girl sighs, wiping her cheek with her thumb. "What I *want* is for our child to grow up with a father, but I'm not a fool. Even if, in some remote eventuality, you'd agree to that, I couldn't allow it, not with your wife being barren. It would break her, and I don't want that on my conscience."

"… Don't you dare talk ill of my wife."

The Girl rolls her eyes. "Talk ill? Oh, come on, the entire archipelago knows. What other reason could there possibly be for the First Magnate and his woman not to have an heir? It had to be either you or her, and," pointing at her belly, "that kind of solves the conundrum, don't you think? I have to hand it to you—that you didn't just discard her and found yourself a fertile woman to do the job really speaks for you." She smiles, all teeth, no eyes. "You must truly love her."

When the Man doesn't answer, the Girl sighs. "Anyway. Since the three of us becoming a happy family obviously isn't an option, I'm asking for your support instead."

"My support?"

"I think this room is too small for an echo. Yuz, your support. I won't go to Qyra to study if that's what it takes to give my son or my daughter the life he or she deserves, but I can't afford it by myself."

"Can't your mother help you?"

"My mother broke off all contact when I told her I was carrying a bastard."

"You didn't—"

"… tell her it was yours? No, she wouldn't believe me anyway. She worships you, as too many people in this country do because they believe that the weight of your purse is equivalent to the value of your soul. My only other living relative is my grandfather, but I can't tell him about this."

"Why not?"

"Because he spent his entire life working for men like you and told me to stay away from them. But, of course, I didn't listen. I guess some lessons have to be learned the hard way." Before the Man can reply, the Girl continues. "A thousand sêr a moon. I'm sure those stupid rings in your beard each cost ten times as much as that, and it's enough to afford a roof over our heads, food, and enough education to give him or her a fair chance in the 'arena.'"

"I didn't get a fair—"

The Girl bolts up. “Shut up! Gods, just shut your foul, fucking, selfish mouth for once! This isn’t about you, this is about your child, don’t you get it?” She points at him with a shaking finger. “A thousand sêr a moon, that’s all I’m asking for. If your own flesh and blood isn’t worth that much to you, then I pray for you that there’s no afterlife, because if there is, not even that all that bloody gold you coated your egotistical little soul with can hide that it’s fucking *rotten*!”

Briefly, the chatter and noises outside seem to cease, as a whirlwind of emotions shoot and flicker through his mind.

You’re a monster.

I’ll be better.

“All right,” the Man says. He speaks quietly. Barely a whisper.

“What was that?”

The Man looks up, forcing himself to meet her eyes. Tears glisten on the Girl’s cheeks.

“I said, ‘All right.’ You’ll get your money, and some more.”

“I’ll… get the money?”

The Man gives her a sour smile. “I believe this room is too small for an echo. Now, is there anything else? I have business to attend do.”

“… No. No, I—that’s it.”

“Then get the hells out of here. We can’t be seen leaving together.”

The Girl hesitates. Then, with an empty smile on her lips, she pats the dust off her yellow tunic and leaves. She walks past the Man without looking at him.

Hand on the door handle, she stops.

“You know,” she says, “when I came here, some silly, foolish part of me actually hoped that you’d change your mind and insist we raise our son or daughter together. Now I know it’s better this way.”

The Man holds her gaze. “Is that so?”

“Yuz. Even a life in poverty is better than one with a father like you.”

She presses the handle. The din of the harbor, chatter, waves, seagulls, come pouring in.

"I'm not like him."

The Girl freezes. "What?"

"I said, 'That was a mistake.'"

The Girl turns to face him, hand clutching the handle. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. You shouldn't have said that."

"Look, I just meant that—"

"You will get no support." The Man stands, crossing to her. "I'll make sure every bank in Kilé refuses you a loan, and I will track down your mother and grandfather, fire them from their jobs, and buy your houses. No business will take you in their service, from the Coalition offices to the stinking whorehouse in the harbor. You will have absolutely nothing to raise this child with, just as my mother and I had nothing, and then, one day, when you wake up on the streets with a handful of dirt to eat and a little brat crying in your lap, you'll fucking wish the child would have a 'father like me.' Seven hells, you'll *wish* he did."

All color drains from the Girl's face. Her mouth forms words, but they came without sound. "You don't mean that," she finally manages.

The Man takes a step forward, now so close he can feel her breath.

"Oh yes, 'vaota,' I mean it. I mean every single fucking word."

Her face cracks. Tears pool on her lids. "No, I… please don't do this. Please don't do this."

Up close and all that pride gone, she looks fragile, just another have-not. Is this really the woman he'd fallen in love with?

"I do what I want."

Interlude

The Day

A SHARP PAIN IN THE GUT yanks the Man out of his nightmare. Blearily, he comes awake, eyeballs burning from the bad sleep. The pain comes again.

Hunger.

His last meal was yesterday morning, a leathery fried plantain and some bread, but though his body craves food he feels no appetite. On the contrary, the stronger his hunger, the more the idea of eating revolts him. His wife knocks again, muttering something about dinner, as if she had read his thoughts. He ignores her. This time, over a minute passes before the footfalls sound again and finally fade.

I can't.

I can't take it.

He rolls over, pulls up his blanket, and shuts his eyes, curtains to a world he doesn't want to see anymore, a cruel world he had shaped. Time creeps by, but after a while sleep comes. This time, he dreams of the Girl and his wife sitting at a table and dining on the Man's severed head on a silver platter, rubies for eyes, his teeth golden.

Then he wakes again; this time, thirst has mixed into the hunger and it's just too much to ignore. Groggily, he sits up on the edge of his bed, the odor of sweat and urine sour in his nostrils. Beyond the window, the sun is setting, red and purple blending into one another like blood and bruises, casting crimson rays into the room. Chilly mountain air juxtaposes the warm colors.

Drink.

You need to drink.

He forces himself to get up, his muscles stiff from the days in bed, and staggers to a low-hanging shelf across from him, where a pitcher of wine sits on the dusty mahogany.

He gulps it down in one long draw, the red liquid trickling down the corners of his mouth and dripping onto to the marble. His throat and gut rebel, but he doesn't care.

You're destructive.

Is that what he told her?

He puts the pitcher back on the dusty table—he feels like slamming it, but he's just too godsdamned tired—and heads back to bed.

Halfway there, a noise stops him mid-motion.

It's an odd sound.

Muffled, irregular thumps, like a finger repeatedly flicking against glass. He freezes. Then he turns his head to the origin of the sound.

His bedside drawer.

Slowly, he walks to it, the sound getting louder. As he sinks to his haunches, a shiver crawls down his sides.

Licking his lips, he opens the topmost drawer. There's a square object between the folded stacks of garments, covered by a small purple cloth.

The Man removes it.

It's a glass cube. Inside it, there's a cockroach.

No. Not a cockroach.

It's like the offspring of a leech, an ant, *and* a cockroach. The creature is small, no longer than a finger-length and half its breadth, with a black, moist carapace reminding the Man of squid skin. Its body is a clump with six stumpy legs poking out on either side, five black dots and feelers on one end all identifying it as its head. The thing darts through its prison in insectile, twitching motions, throwing its weight against the glass panes of cube as if trying to break through.

The shiver crawls up the Man's shoulders, through his ears into his skull.

It's alive.

He's surprised at the shock that comes with the thought. As if it wasn't him who bought that egg from that tattooed Makehu. As if the knowledge of it incubating right next to him hadn't been all that kept him going those past three days.

It's alive.

The shock disappears and a peculiar calm manifests. Carefully, he lifts the glass cube with index finger and thumb, bringing it level with his eyes. The insect stops twitching and faces him. Its feelers move, drawing slow circles. As if it's communicating with him.

As if telling him it knows.

I imprinted it on you.

That's what the Makehu said after he'd placed the cold, gray egg on the Man's palm. He'd told him to take a mental image of it, then close his eyes and then recreate it in his mind. The Man had done as asked, and, after a minute, cold had swelled in his temples.

It'll follow your command now.

The Man tears his gaze away from the insect and looks outside. The sun is almost down to the horizon. Tears trail down his cheeks.

He puts the cube with the insect back into the dresser and covers it with the purple cloth. This time, the thumping doesn't resume. He closes the drawer and studies the ornaments worked into the wood for a while. Then he stands and walks back over to his bed and sits down on the edge of it. Then he takes a folded paper from the inside chest pocket of his robes.

He reads it, then reads it again.

And again.

He feels nothing, only that silent resolve he's been feeling ever since discovering the hatched insect.

When the Man was in his early thirties, a freshly-minted magnate, a worker hung himself in one of his warehouses after the Man had axed him. When the Man was told, he felt terrible. That worker hadn't been the first of the Man's employees to end his life, but he was the first where the causality was so clear. The Man's friend had pulled him out of his angry melancholy.

"A person's choice to end their lives," he said, "is always their own. Life's an arena, and even when you're in the dust bleeding and the lions are about to rip you apart, the decision to throw yourself into the wall of spikes behind you is your own."

Back then, the Man found solace in the thought. Made it his creed.

Now he knows it's not that simple.

Yuz, the arena isn't to blame. Perhaps the lions aren't neither. But if you're the one who built the arena, bred the lions, and instigated the crowds, you may not be the one to have pushed the gladiator into the spikes, but you damn well were the one who put him into his position in the first place.

The Girl was no different.

Her decision to jump off that cliff had been hers and hers alone. Dropping a hundred arm-lengths onto solid stone, breaking every bone in her body, killing their unborn child.

But hadn't he guided her to the cliff?

He remembers the first time he read the letter she'd sent him before the deed, now almost two moons ago. There were no accusations, no insults, no demands. Mechanically, she had laid out her arguments and her conclusion, as well as where and how she'd do it, right after writing the last line. Like a merchant explaining the reasons for closing down a shop that couldn't maintain itself.

At first, he didn't believe her—just another way to extort money from him, to make him go back on his decision. His denial didn't last long. Just hours later, he sent a sellsword to look for her corpse. She found it. The Man ordered her to dump it in the sewers. And the moment the sellsword closed the door behind her was when the Man finally broke.

The next day, he went to his childhood home. Two weeks after that, to the priest. Then the conference.

He looks up, his eyes blurry. That magnificent, bloody sunset is over, ushering in that short period of half-light the Makehu call "Spirit Hour."

Numbly, he gets up and walks over to the only sconce in the room that's still burning—all the others have run out of oil. He reads the letter one last time, then burns it. The fire devours the paper, smothers the words, erases their meaning. When the flames reach his fingertips, he holds on to the paper, endures the pain until it's all ashes. As if the Girl never existed.

He tidies up his room, calls a servant, and orders a bath.

Freshly washed and wearing a white robe, he finds his wife in the orchard where she's reading a book. The wayside torches are on, as the last patches of blue sky turn black. Even though deep, dark circles underline his wife's eyes, and there's more gray at her temples, she looks as wonderful as the first time they met. She gasps as she sees him, drops her book and runs to him, throwing her arms around his neck. For a heartbeat, the warmth is back. Then the calm kills it.

Arm in arm they stroll through the garden, the breeze rustling the leaves of the hollies. Talking and laughing like in the old days.

How strange it is.

Only two hours ago, he couldn't bear the thought of leaving his chambers, and seeing his wife or anyone else had made him feel like screaming. Now he feels almost a semblance of comfort. Probably because it wasn't until the insect hatched and he burned the letter that he truly made his decision.

He plays his role well, nodding in the right places, even managing a smile or two. He's laid out an excuse explaining his odd behavior in the past moon, but his wife merely shakes her head and tells him that there'll be plenty of time for explanations later. She lightly presses his hand as she says it. After dinner, the Man retires to his chambers. His wife offers to join him, but the lie that he just needs an hour to himself slips from his lips as easily as the order to dump the Girl's corpse in the sewers had been.

Back in the room, he eases down on the fresh sheets of his bed, back propped against the headboard. The insect rests in his palm, the empty glass hidden in the bottom drawer of a cupboard where no one will find it.

He thought about leaving his wife a letter, for closure. But he's too much of a coward even for that. A letter meant telling her what he had done, and, perhaps in a last, desperate bout of vanity, he doesn't want to destroy that illusory image of him that she still clings to.

He studies the insect. Even though it's so tiny, a strong, terrible cold radiates off its moist gray body, like a kiss from a corpse's lips. The lack of irises in its black-dot eyes

make it impossible to tell what the insect is looking at, but the Man knows they are locked on his.

You're a monster.

At least that part the Girl had gotten wrong. He isn't just a monster; he is the creator of monsters, the architect of the arena, the father of suffering. That thought he had in the temple was right after all: There were a million marks on his soul, and they had festered and turned it into a cancerous growth that could not heal.

Tears trail down his cheeks. He lets them come, wishing they were acid.

Absolution?

Even the forgiveness the priest had offered him, and which he had so violently rejected, was more than he deserved. There was no clearing his name, no 'fixing this.' He let miners choke to death in his nuvium pits, he drove people into suicide for charging them money just to drink from a river, he was ready to accept the deaths of thousands for his madman plan, and for what? Only so that he, the fisherman's son, could be even richer in his ugly, lifeless prison of stone, only that he could feel in control, that he could keep telling that godsdamned ghost of Popâ that he'd been wrong, that fate was a lie, that you didn't have to accept the hand life dealt you, to *fucking look how far he'd come*!

He.

Jaaros.

Ismiraael.

Oonai.

Cheater. Liar. Murderer.

Killed his own child and his lover over a thousand sêr, the cost of his boots.

As if listening to his thoughts, the insect's feelers move, its eyes bearing into his own, black as charcoal, black as silence, black as oblivion.

He can't undo his sins, he can't be better, there is no absolution.

But at least he can pay for what he's done.

The Man nods.

And the dream-eater shoots up his arm, through the sleeve of his robe, over his shoulder, up his neck and onto his chin. For not even a breath, it wavers. Then it vanishes inside the Man's right nostril. Pain flares up in his temples, but it's gone as fast as it came. He leans back into his pillows as sleep overcomes him, a blue-black fog dissolving the world.

It's almost peaceful.

Chapter 24

Coward

I'M SO SORRY."

Agaam studied Jespar, his eye an inscrutable mirror. "Me too." He looked away, studying some point in the darkness. "Had I known she'd taken on that job in Kâara Manor, I might have been able to do something, but she never told me. Just like her mother, my daughter in law, didn't… we were never on good terms, she and I."

Jespar touched the cut on his throat, feeling a droplet of blood stick to his fingertips. A sour taste formed on his tongue. "Why?"

"Well, the way she saw it, I should have used my relationship to Oonai to springboard Yamin's career. She didn't understand I intentionally did that to protect her." In rough, yanking motions, he loosened the bandage around his thigh, grimacing as he did so. "The Magnates, the Big Dream, Fortune Road… if there's anything I learned from forty years of working for the lot, it's that the Big Dreamers always pay a price. That race to the top… it takes something from you, be it your soul, your health, or, in Yamin's case, your life." Grimacing, he readjusted the cloth, then pulled it tight. "But, sadly, that's a lesson people have to learn for themselves. You can tell them a million times, and they'll still call you a ne'er-do-well or an underachiever. That's why I never did anything to actively put obstacles in her way. I told her my opinion and left it at that. Maybe that was a mistake."

Jespar lowered his eyes, noticing his right hand still held on to the dagger. Mechanically, he sheathed it. "And Oonai never even found out she was your granddaughter? All that time you've been in his service, and he had no idea you were related?"

"Well, I made a habit of keeping my family life a secret ever since I joined the Jade Carapace. That didn't change when I started working for Oonai." Agaam gave him a hollow smile. "Of course, he could have found out if he wanted to… he just didn't care. As for why Yamin didn't tell him herself, I can only speculate. I guess she simply didn't want anyone, him or the other servants, to think I greased palms to get her the job. That's also the part her mother never understood, you know? Yamin wouldn't have accepted my help even if I offered it. She wanted to be the architect of her own fortune, not some rich girl whose grandfather pulled strings for her." He snorted softly, shaking his head. "Proud little thing, that's what she was. Determined to leave her mark on the world, no matter what." He was silent for another moment. Then he stood, wincing as he did so. "Either way, we can't waste more time. You need to convince Oonai to release the parasite."

Parasite.

Though Agaam had spent several minutes explaining how he had figured out Oonai had infected himself—starting from him meeting with the Makehu fence three days prior to his infection, ending with him finding the glass cube in his drawer—Jespar had somehow managed to suppress the knowledge of the one in his own brain for the entire length of the conversation. Now it was back, sending an itching sensation down his forehead.

"You want us to travel into his dream again," Jespar said.

"That's why I came back. If only the person controlling the dream-eater can recall it, then you'll have to convince him to recall it. It's the only way to save you and the ziggurat."

Jespar studied the old servant as he adjusted his weapon belt. "You think Oonai can still save the ziggurat."

"If anyone can, it's him," Agaam said, offering him a hand up.

Jespar took it, allowing Agaam to pull him to his feet. "You have a lot of confidence in that man considering what he's done."

"It's not about confidence—it's about knowing what the man can do. He's a monster, but he has a hand for manipulation and persuasion like no other. How much time do you have left? Before the next…"

The itch intensified. Jespar sensed for signs of cold in his temples, but there was nothing. It must have been roughly two hours since his last refocusing, and approximately four hours had passed between his seizure on Fortune Road and the one after their visit into Vel'Nyx's *tuewa*. Considering the intervals were growing shorter and Kawu was too weak to perform even one more refocusing, how much did this leave him with?

"I don't know," Jespar said. "Maybe a little more than an hour."

Maybe less.

Agaam nodded, jaw set. "Then we better get going."

A whirlwind of thoughts spun in Jespar's head as he followed the old servant through the animal maze back onto the aisle where he'd left the escort. Two thoughts were louder than the others: There was still hope. And they'd need to be fast.

Though Agaam's injured thigh forced them to go slower, it didn't take them long to reach the ziggurat pantry. It was a corridor from which spacious rooms branched off to either side, crates, barrels, shelves, and bulbous earthenware showing behind the grated walls. Halfway down its length, a female voice became audible in the distance, shouting Jespar's name. The pantry led to a stair that opened into a vast chamber, stretching on as far as the eye could see. The walls and arched ceiling were cut into the stone, giving it a cavernous impression—row after row of barrels the size of horses lined the walls, and a sweet, earthy smell permeated the air. *The wine cellar*, Jespar thought. They were approaching the tunnel. Torches were mounted on the walls at regular intervals, but only half of them were alight. A figure hurried down the aisle bisecting the barrels, headed in their direction. She froze when she saw Agaam and Jespar.

"Easy," Agaam called, his voice echoing from the high walls. "It's us."

Eyes wide, Lysia lifted the hand from her baton.

She came back for you, Jespar thought.

She actually came back.

"… Agaam?"

"Yuz. Where are the others?"

Lysia's eyes flicked to Jespar; he looked away. "They… they went ahead," Lysia said. "They should be in the tunnel by now."

"What about Kawu?" Jespar said from a dry throat.

"He's with them… he's been getting worse ever since you disappeared." She spoke softly, still eyeing them as if convinced she was talking to an illusion. "Jespar, what… what happened? One moment you were in the back, the next you were gone."

Agaam answered before Jespar had the chance. "He'll explain everything on the way. Have they detonated the tunnel yet?"

Lysia blinked. "How do you k—"

"Have they? I need to know."

"No. No, I don't think so. I would have heard by now."

"That means we still have time. Come."

As they hurried through the cellar, Jespar gave Lysia a summary of what Agaam had told him. When she repeated her question about how he had gotten lost in the first place, he gave a vague story about being disoriented from the headache—it probably sounded as convincing as it felt to tell it, but neither did Agaam correct him, nor did Lysia press the matter. In fact, when Jespar was done something about her seemed to have changed, and it took Jespar a moment to realize what it was. Throughout their journey, there had always been a certain energy about Lysia that changed whatever situation they'd found themselves in: a sharp tongue in her discussions with Enkshi, that lop-sided grin in the cutter's cabin on their way to Yuva, that anger when they'd found out about the Overgrowth Plan. No matter what shape, though, that energy had always stayed regardless of what they'd faced—until now. Throughout his explanations, something had drained from Lysia's face, leaving her with a strange neutral expression that made her seem like a different person entirely.

"There's just one part I don't understand," Lysia said to Agaam as they were making their way down the endless aisle. There was no discernible emotion in her voice. "Why didn't you kill him?"

If the question surprised Agaam, he didn't show it. "Good question. I've asked myself the same thing many times."

"And?"

He raised his hand and stopped, running his eyes over the barrels left of them. Then he went on. "I don't know, Varroy. Back then I told myself it was because I didn't know for sure he'd done all those things Yamin accused him of in that last letter she sent him."

"What reason would she have had to lie?"

Agaam stopped again, tracing his hand over the barrel to their right. Nodding, he circled it, inspecting the wall behind it. "None. And you're right, it all lined up too well—her sudden disappearance, her mother confirming she'd worked in the manor after I pressed her. But still, you'd be surprised at the lengths your mind can go to convince yourself there's another explanation you haven't thought of. At the latest after those guards had found her corpse when we returned from Yuva, I should have known for certain, but I didn't react even then. Which leads me to believe there was another reason for not killing him altogether." Agaam reached behind the barrel. There was a metallic click and it moved slightly upwards. He turned to face them. "I just enjoyed seeing him suffer."

When neither Jespar nor Lysia had an answer to this, Agaam gripped the edge of the barrel's back hoop and yanked it hard; he winced and withdrew his right hand, a small flower of fresh blood soaking the bandage. "Give me a hand, will you?"

They joined him, each gripping the hoop on one side.

"On my mark," Agaam said.

They pulled the barrel as hard as they could. It didn't budge at first, but then there was another metallic noise, and it slid forward so fast that Jespar almost lost his footing. There was an opening in the wall behind it, the space beyond black as tar. Agaam went back into the hallway and returned with a torch, beckoning them to follow.

Just like the wine cellar, the escape tunnel was cut into the rock with crude flagstone as paving. It sloped steeply downward and the humid air had made the floor slippery, so they had to tread carefully so as not to lose their footing and tumble down the slope, breaking their every bone. It was maddening—every muscle in him wanted to run, but he couldn't. At last, voices became audible in the distance.

"That's them," Jespar said, itching to dash ahead. "That's the escort."

Agaam narrowed his eye, the torchlight throwing a warping shadow on his face. "Hm. They aren't moving."

Lysia walked up beside him. "How do you know?"

"Because they aren't getting any louder."

They pushed on. A few minutes and some turns later, light mixed into the thick darkness ahead. People crowded the hallway, too many for the narrow space. Two guards formed the tail, one leaning against the wall bouncing his foot up and down and his eyes darting about, the other sitting cross-legged on the paving, his face immovable. Jespar recognized them both: his escort. When the young one noticed Agaam, his hand shot to the hilt of his scimitar.

"Stay where you are!"

Scared, Jespar thought. The guard was scared.

Why?

"Easy, boy," Agaam said. "We're on your side."

The guard drew his blade. "I said, stay where you are!"

Mâadira's voice cut through the tunnel. "Saaras'jodule, put down that weapon down *now*!" She came through the crowd, elbowing her way through the perplexed servants and guards who had all turned to look what was happening. Stopping an arm-length from the old servant, she bowed deeply. Mâadira's bristles were soaked with sweat, sticking to her forehead like a black cap, her eyes like she hadn't slept in days. Still, when they met Agaam, they creased in a smile. "That's Xeelo Agaam." The reverence in her voice made Jespar wonder how many people in Oonai's staff knew about the old servant's true identity.

Agaam returned a nod. “We need to talk to the boy. And to you.”

A moment passed before Mâadira realized he was talking about Kawu. “I’m… afraid that’s not possible.”

Agaam raised an eyebrow.

“He got some sort of fever attack just after we entered the tunnel. The medicus gave him a sedative.”

Jespar’s stomach cramped. “Is he okay?”

“I don’t know, ma’sao. The medicus said he’s never seen anything like it, as if his skull’s on fire. For now, all we can do is let him rest.”

Only that that isn’t an option because we need him.

Agaam went past her, the guards parting with baffled looks on their faces. “Then we need to wake him up. As I said, we need to talk to him.”

Mâadira caught up to Agaam, Jespar and Lysia on their heels. “Ma’sao, there’s something else you need to—”

“The Scythe are waiting in the alcove?” Agaam asked.

Mâadira tensed. “You know?”

“What other reason is there for you to stop? I suspected they know about the escape tunnel.” They stopped at a small natural alcove that branched off left of the tunnel, lit by two torches the soldiers had mounted on the ground. There, Kawu lay on his stretcher next to the Ma’saa’s and Jaaros Oonai’s.

When he’d last spoken to Kawu in the atrium, he had looked better—still weak, still famished, but on the mend. Whatever had happened in this one hour they’d been separated, it had shattered the illusion. His cheek and jawbones drew hard edges in his face, his complexion a pale green even in the amber lighting. Sweat soaked his white reed tunic, his clavicle showing through the fabric.

Gods, Jespar thought. *Gods.*

He hurried over and dropped to his haunches beside Kawu. “No… no, what is that? He was getting better!”

"He was," a man leaning against the alcove wall said. He wore orange robes, his gaunt face crowned by thinning hair. Even his bulky Starling spectacles couldn't hide the shadows under his eyes. Jespar remembered him: Oonai's medicus. "Then he started screaming and tossing about all of a sudden and had a fever big enough to kill a myrad. I have no idea what's happening to him."

Lysia squatted down next to Jespar and placed her hand on Kawu's forehead. "What did you give him? Poppy juice?"

"Gruntroot," the medicus said. "And catnip for the fever."

Lysia scoffed. "Catnip for a fever this bad is like sprinkling water into a wildfire. Don't you have some etheryme or blackseeds?"

The medicus set his jaw. "I'm sorry, but the blackseed is for the Ma'saa. I only have a couple, and—" Before the medicus could finish his sentence, Jespar was before him, pinning him against the wall with his elbow. "Give him that medicine," he said, voice shaking.

The man croaked something, his eyes bulging.

"Jespar," Lysia said from behind him. "Stop."

"Give him that *medicine*!"

"Jespar!"

He spun around. All eyes were on him. Mâadira had her hand on the hilt of her scimitar, Agaam regarded him with his arms crossed. Jespar hesitated for a moment, then let the medicus go, muttering something that vaguely sounded like an apology.

Mâadira took her hand off the sheath. "Give him that extract," she told the medicus.

He frowned, rubbing his throat. "But the Ma'saa…"

"That *wasn't* a question."

The medicus sighed and went over to the stretcher, but Lysia waved him off. "Never mind. Blackseed isn't going to do him much good at this stage, and even if it did, it would put him into an even deeper sleep we couldn't wake him from. If we want him awake, we need light magic."

Agaam stepped forward, looking at Kawu with clouded eyes. "Can you do it?"

"I don't know. You need to know *what* to fix to find the proper eventuality to borrow the cure from. If I just start using magic left and right on him, it might do more harm than good."

"You need to try," Agaam said. "Without him, we're lost."

Mâadira stepped up to the stretcher, eyes narrowed. Most of the escort had gathered at the alcove entrance by now, watching the scene with mixed expressions. "What do you mean?" Mâadira asked. "What are you planning to do?"

"We'll tell you everything once he's awake," Agaam replied, his tone leaving no room for discussion. "Do it, Varroy. Wake him up."

Lysia held Agaam's gaze for a heartbeat longer, then she muttered something and focused on Kawu's pallid face. Something in her eyes changed—that telltale, faraway look of a mage gazing into the Sea of Eventualities.

Jespar went back to the stretcher and eased down beside her, holding Kawu's hand, his eyeballs burning, his stomach cold.

Help him, Lysia.

Help him.

The air around Kawu distorted, the same way it turned wavy over a fire. The hair on Jespar's arms stood up. Lysia winced, eyelids fluttering.

Please.

Kawu jerked awake. Lysia gasped and fell over to the side; Jespar steadied her.

For several heartbeats, the silence was complete except for the crackling of the torches.

Kawu slowly turned to Jespar. "… You're back."

His face still looked skeletal, his eyes bloodshot, exhaustion written all over his face. And still, he was alive.

Lowering his eyes, Jespar let out a long breath. "Yeah. I'm here."

"What… what happened?"

Agaam squatted at the foot of the stretcher. "That's what we came here to tell you."

When Mâadira had ushered all the servants and guards out of earshot, Jespar told Agaam's story for a second time, keeping out the fact that Yamin had been Agaam's

niece. When he was done, Mâadira studied the ground, arms clasped behind her back. Conflicting emotions flickered over her face, but she stayed silent.

"So we need to return to his *tuewa*," Kawu said. His voice sounded frail and thin, as if every word took effort to speak.

Lysia nodded.

Kawu closed his eyes. "I don't know. I'm so tired, like something's about to… break."

Jespar pressed Kawu's hand. Kawu gave him a grateful smile but winced when he moved his head to look at him.

"Maybe there's another way," Jespar said. "The Scythe's waiting in the cove, Mâadira. How many are they?"

"I… we don't know. The scouts saw about two or three dozen, but there are likely more if they're actually expecting us."

Jespar looked at Agaam. "Still, we could try fighting our way through. Then we flee to Kiia, wait for Kawu to recover and travel into Oonai's dream then."

"That's risky. Even if there aren't more, they still outnumber us."

Jespar tensed his jaw. "But we have you. I saw what you can do."

"I'm wounded. And even if that weren't the case, we'd effectively be risking the lives of the entire escort for a slim chance at escape."

"What, but risking him is okay? Gods, all I'm asking is that we tr—"

"What about you?"

Jespar turned to Lysia. Squatting beside him, she had her hands folded, fingers intertwined and elbows propped on her thighs. For a breath, that itch on his scalp was back, like ants crawling around the shafts of his hair. "I told you. I can take it."

Ignoring Mâadira's questioning look, Agaam said, "That's very noble of you. But as I said, this is about more than just your life—it's about of everyone in these tunnels *and* the entirety of Kilé."

Jespar scoffed. "Right. Because you actually still think that fucking son of a whore can save us."

While Mâadira sucked in air at that, Agaam's face didn't move a muscle. "Yuz, Dal'Varek. That's what I believe."

He turned to Kawu, his eyes weary. "Still, in the end it's up to you, boy. We cannot force you, and if you think you're too weak, then we'll do what Dal'Varek suggests and fight."

Mâadira bit her lip. "Ma'sao, surely you can't—"

"It's his choice," Agaam said. "Let him make it."

A long silence followed. A cascade of emotions flickered through Kawu's eyes. Then he closed them.

When he opened them again, all the frailty was gone. "Okay."

Jespar winced. "Kawu…"

"It's okay." Kawu said, giving Jespar's hand a light squeeze. "I can do it."

For some long heartbeats, no one said anything. Then Agaam placed his hand on Kawu's knee. Even while he'd told Jespar of his granddaughter's death, his good eye had always kept that inscrutable, hardened wood quality. Now, albeit just for a breath, it was gone. "Thank you, boy. You're brave."

A hint of pride showed on Kawu's face, but it disappeared. "There's just one problem: I don't have any more *znah.*"

"Znah?" Mâadira asked behind them.

"That's that droga, right?" Lysia asked. "The one that prevents us from freaking out in the In-Between?"

"Yuz," Kawu said. "I can still take you with me, but it'll be… unpleasant."

Lysia smiled joylessly. "'Unpleasant' is the least of our worries right now. What about the dream-eater's defense mechanism? The one that separated us last time?"

"I should be able to mask our approach. Last time I wasn't expecting it, now I am."

"And Dal'Varek's condition?" Agaam asked. "What if the parasite hatches right in the dream? You said you can't do another refocusing, so maybe it would be safer if he stayed here with us."

Kawu hesitated. “Actually, it should be safer *in* the dream. We’ll only be gone for five minutes here in *akhara*. The dream-eater can’t make much progress in that time.”

When there were no further objections, Agaam nodded. “Fair enough. When can we start?”

Kawu turned his head to look at Jespar. For a breath, there was something in Kawu’s face that sent a stab into Jespar’s chest. *Sorrow?* It was gone before Jespar could tell. A pale smile came on Kawu’s lips.

“Now.”

***

As Jespar sunk through the In-Between, he understood why it was that so many dreamwalkers eventually went mad. Except for that one time when Oonai’s dream-eater had separated Jespar from the others when they’d tried to enter his *tuewa* for the first time, Kawu’s droga had made it a peculiar and oddly fascinating experience, as if his mind was cushioned in cotton that absorbed all negative emotions before they could manifest.

With that blanket gone, Jespar felt lost.

Here they were, just three specks of stardust traversing that black vastness housing a billion minds, entertaining the ludicrous delusion that their individual fates, lives, and struggles mattered. How did he ever believe it in the first place? Even disregarding the millions of corners of the universe humanity hadn’t even begun to explore, theirs was just one reality in an infinite ocean.

Lost.

Rich, poor, old, young, Human, Starling, or Aeterna. In the end, what did it matter?

He focused on his breathing, ignoring his mind’s protests that a man underwater shouldn’t be breathing at all, ignoring the task that lay before them, to talk a man off a cliff who was already falling, whose mind had probably been corroded into madness by the endless nightmare the parasite had created for it.

Ignoring that strange look in Kawu’s eyes when he’d told them he was ready.

Time crept by, in that same sideways-tilted hourglass way that made it impossible to tell minutes from hours and hours from seconds. They just followed Kawu as he sank deeper and deeper, his emaciated body and sickly pallor making him look like a sinking corpse. Several times, Jespar tried to catch up to him by willing his avatar to sink faster, but always Kawu seemed to adjust his speed so he remained a silhouette below Jespar, facing the dark beneath.

It happened when they found Oonai's dream: a bubble floating in the blackness holding a dead jungle and a ruined ziggurat on a gray wasteland.

Kawu went limp.

There was no scream, no convulsion, no struggle. One second, he was sinking, the next he just floated there, head lowered, limbs hanging lifelessly, like a puppet discarded into the ocean.

Jespar stared.

No.

The thought came muffled, as if shrouded by fog. It left no resonance, caused no feeling.

No, he thought again.

It's not happening.

Then the horror broke down upon him. Panic gripping him, he spun so he was facing the bottom and swam, frantically closing the distance between Kawu and him, everything forgotten—Lysia, Oonai, the dream-eater. When he reached him, he grabbed him by the shoulders, shook him, screamed soundless words that came out in a stream of bubbles. Kawu didn't react. Jespar wrapped his arms around him, pulling him close, as if that could in any way undo what happened, as if he had ever been able to fix *anything*, as if he could wish him back to life if only he held him long enough.

Back to life.

What?

Why?

Why had he thought that?

Kawu wasn't dead. He couldn't—he *wasn't*.

He couldn't say for how long he remained this way—holding Kawu's limp body submerged in that black ocean, floating above Oonai's dream. Oonai's dream beneath their feet. All he knew was that, at one point, someone touched him on the shoulder. Lysia's face appeared in the darkness. She reached out to him, touching his shoulder, her lips moving but the water swallowed all sound, and pointed down.

Numbly, Jespar nodded. Lysia remained a moment longer, then let herself sink down towards the bubble. Once she had passed through, she started to fall—first slowly, then faster, as if the ground was a magnet pulling her towards it, her shape growing smaller and smaller until she was but a miniature person on the overgrown stone path that led to the ziggurat. She scrambled to her feet, then looked skyward, probably trying to look in Jespar's direction but only seeing that black-violet sky the bubble had turned to the moment she had passed through.

Why wasn't he crying?

He wanted to. His eyeballs burned, his lungs itched; he wanted to scream.

But he couldn't.

For one long moment, he considered just staying here, trapped in that timeless ether, that limbo that was neither dream nor reality, neither alive nor dead.

Then he remembered Lysia, Agaam, Mâadira, the medicus, even the old guard with the scar who had nothing but contempt for him.

He remembered what was at stake.

Closing his eyes, he let himself sink, Kawu close to his chest. Warm air enfolded him as he passed through the bubble, earthy, rotten. Above him, the bubble morphed into the dream world's gray sky, the red-violet moon showing through the clouds like a fluorescent tumor. He fell, slow at first, then faster; as before, his fall stopped abruptly just before his boots touched the ground. Softly, he dropped down onto the stone, shying away two fist-sized spiders that disappeared into the dead bushes. Now that the weightlessness of the water was gone, Kawu weighed heavy in his arms, almost pulling him down along with him. Lysia was by him at once, helping Jespar to ease him onto the

cracked stone. Words poured from her mouth, but Jespar didn't listen. He sank onto the floor, sitting on his buttocks leaning on his palms, watching as Lysia felt Kawu's pulse, his heart, listened for his breath. When she sat back with her face like a shattered mask, Jespar, even though he'd known all along, felt something shatter.

"That's not fair," she said. "That's not fair."

For a while, they just sat there, side by side, the ruined ziggurat rising before them like the temple of a long-forgotten god.

"He knew it," Jespar said at last.

Lysia looked to him, tears pooling on her lids.

Jespar's eyes burnt like hot coals in his sockets, but no tears came. "He knew the descent would kill him, but he did it anyway."

Lysia looked at Kawu, then pressed her eyes shut, as if trying to erase the image from her mind. "You don't know," she said softly.

When Jespar didn't reply, Lysia slammed her fist into the ground. "Then why? Why the hell did he do that? You were right, we could have fought! Fucking hells, we *could have fought*!"

Jespar looked at Kawu's corpse.

I'm not brave, Dal'Varek.

I'm a coward, I'm weak, and I'm selfish.

"I don't know."

Chapter 25

Mother

HAD SOMEONE ELSE SEEN JESPAR, they would have probably described him as emotionless. The way he sat there on the cracked alley framed by dead palms, cross-legged, propped on his palms behind him; his mask-like face and the glassy look in his eyes.

They would have been right: he did feel nothing.

It had been this way ever since Lysia had confirmed Kawu's death, and this time it was more than that numbness he'd felt when he had found his sister.

It was as if something had shattered.

The burning in the back of his eyes, that urge to cry, that grief had disappeared and the pain along with it. He just sat there, looking at Kawu's corpse on the paving as if it was a piece of rubble.

Because that is how it ends.

Always.

People he cared for died. He couldn't fix them, couldn't stop it.

At one point, Lysia sank to her haunches beside him. Her cheeks were wet, eyes bloodshot and glistening; it surprised Jespar. Just like him, she had known Kawu for less than a week. Unlike him, she hadn't talked to Kawu on the way back to Yuva, sensing that odd fascination spread in her chest. Unlike him, she hadn't kissed him on the finger-shaped rock, felt his breath in her neck. Unlike him, Kawu hadn't sacrificed his life to save her. Because that's what it came down to, wasn't it? Had he not been so godsdamned stupid and allowed himself to be infected, Kawu would have never had to perform the refocusings. He'd be with them right now, alive and breathing, facing that last challenge with them together. And yet there she was, eyes bloodshot and wet, and Jespar's weren't.

"Jespar," she said. "Come."

Slowly, Jespar turned his gaze away from Kawu's body and looked at her. "Is he really dead?" His voice reflected his face. Flat. Mechanical.

Lysia lowered her eyes. "You heard what Kawu said. If you die in someone else's dream—"

"Can you do something? You're a light mage, so maybe you can still heal him."

Why did he ask these questions? He knew the answers already.

Lysia exhaled wearily. "You know magic doesn't work in here. And even if it did, light magic can only help as long as there's still life force left in someone." She offered him a hand up. "Now come. We have to end this."

"We have to carry him," he said. "We can't leave him here like that."

"We will."

For a heartbeat longer, he remained as he was. Then he took Lysia's hand. Together, they lifted Kawu, carrying him between them, each with one arm slid under a shoulder. His skin was still warm and wet from the water; provided the process of dying in a dream didn't differ from dying in the real world, it would stay this way for about a half day. Before that, his body would grow stiff and heavy, a biological process called cadaveric rigidity. Jespar wondered what it would be like when they awoke, *if* they awoke. Would Kawu already be—

Stop.

Don't think about this.

Don't.

Lysia regarded him, concerned.

Jespar looked away. "Let's go."

The ziggurat had changed since their last visit. The small, red vines that had been creeping from every crack and crevice had grown thicker into fleshy veins that now overgrew the entire building like a rampaging tumor, culminating at Oonai's statue at the ziggurat's apex, where they slung around his legs as if to prevent him from fleeing. Half the statue's face was missing, the jagged edge pronounced by the violet moonlight.

Insects of all kinds and sizes swarmed the steps and the paving, scurrying off when Jespar and Lysia came near, carrying Kawu between them.

They were halfway up to the seventh tier—hoping they'd find him where they'd found him last time, in the physician's room—when Jespar felt it.

He stopped dead.

"Jespar?" Lysia's voice sounded beside him. "What's wrong?"

He opened his mouth to answer, then closed it.

"Jespar?"

"Yes, I'm... I'm here."

"What's wrong?"

"It's... the dream-eater." A sour taste formed in his mouth. "I think it has hatched."

There was a long silence. Someone emerged from one of the doors on the colonnade to their left, a Makehu man with a noose around a snapped neck. He glanced in their direction, then continued down the walkway and disappeared into another door.

Lysia licked her lips. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"But you're still here. Didn't Kawu say it would take you right into your nightmare?"

Jespar adjusted his grip on Kawu. Was that his imagination or had he gotten colder? *No*. No, it was too early for that. A gust swept across the stairs, carrying the smell of ashes and rot. "Maybe it can't because I'm already dreaming. I don't know."

Lysia pressed her eyes shut, shaking her head. "This is such a mess. Such a *fucking* mess."

Jespar didn't argue. "There's one upside to it, though. I think I can sense its... excitement."

"What do you mean?"

"I think that the dream-eater senses we're near its mother. Maybe we can use that to find Oonai."

“…Like a compass.”

"Exactly."

"Hm. And what does it say? Can you feel where he is?"

"Let me try." Slowly, Jespar let his eyes wander across the ruined ziggurat: up the stairs, where that girl with the blank face and the hole in her stomach sat on the steps, legs crossed, watching him; up to the garden tier, where a giant millipede slithered along the facade; down to the forecourt, where a swarm of blood-soaked, naked toddlers had appeared, playing and rolling on the ashen ground, their high-pitched and distorted shrieks and laughs ringing across the courtyard like a madhouse choir. When his gaze reached a small pathway running along the ziggurat's eastern side and vanishing behind it, a tickle crept down his forehead.

"There," he said, pointing at the path.

Lysia squinted. A cluster of black clouds had slid over the violet moon, dimming the light. Light rain had set in, pattering off the stone. "Okay," she said. "Lead the way."

The trail snaked past the ziggurat, into a sprawling wild garden. While it might have been a sight to behold in reality, here it was a field of withered palms and sun-charred grass and hollies, all enmeshed in delicate webbing Jespar recognized as the nests of webworms. The path snaked on this way for some arm-lengths, then turned into a wooden walkway leading across a lake whose symmetrical shores had an air of the artificial. In the center of the lake was an island, barren as a wasteland. On it stood a small pyramid.

The tingle in Jespar's skull grew stronger, now reaching all the way from the bridge of his nose to the back of his scalp.

Quietly, they crossed the lake, his arms aching more and more from Kawu's weight. He ignored it. The rain was pouring now, intensifying the aroma of rot around them; warm drops trailing down their faces, tasting sour as they pooled on Jespar's lips and the corners of his mouth.

The island was deserted. No insects, no corpse toddlers, no faceless women. The pyramid rose about twenty arm-lengths high, made of three stone blocks each growing smaller towards the top like a miniature ziggurat. Blue-gray walling with chipped streaks of brownish yellow hinted at what in reality were probably lapis-lazuli tiles with gold

ornaments; the fleshy red vines had conquered its entire facade, making it look like some monster's nest. Only the fresco above the entry remained strangely intact, a depiction of Morala facing visitors with cunning but kind eyes.

"The *raawa*," Lysia said beside Jespar.

Jespar looked at her, raising an eyebrow.

"That's got to be the temple the Ma'saa was telling us about back when we first met her. Remember?"

A vague memory came to Jespar's mind, one that felt as if it belonged to a different life. "Right. Where she had that vision."

"Mm-hm. Still sure this is the place?"

Jespar knew it wasn't a real question—there was probably a part of her who didn't want Oonai to be here, who wanted to stall, to buy more time searching before they confronted him, because confrontation meant the chance of failure. He couldn't blame her. The odds were against them, even more so than they had been back when they'd attempted to convince Vel'Nyx. All they had were Kawu's rules of dreams he had repeated to them before going under his last time: Don't break the narrative. Act the part. They'd have to find a way to convince the dreaming Jaaros Oonai to recall the dream-eater, without him noticing they weren't part of the dream. If and how the dream-eater played into this, they didn’t know.”

"I'm sure," Jespar said. "Oonai's waiting for us right behind that door."

Lysia drew a long breath. "Okay. No point in stalling the inevitable, I guess. How do we do it?"

Jespar's eyes trailed off, up the *raawa.* An amber glow shone through the slitted windows and the top segment was partially broken, rain falling through a large hole in the roof.

"I have an idea."

***

The *raawa* was a square hall with a circular, shallow pool in the center, with a statue of Morala rising from a pedestal in the middle. Or at least something that looked like her—she was holding a basket and a sheaf of wheat, same as the statues Jespar had seen all around the city, but her skyward-turned face was twisted in a scream and two stone lobsters were stuck into her eyes and mouth like food stuffing. Illumined only by a crescent of candles at the statue's feet and the scattered violet moonlight falling through the broken section of the ceiling, the image was so chilling Jespar didn't immediately notice the ragged figure leaning with its back propped at the statue's feet.

With his gaunt face and ghoulish pallor, the Jaaros Oonai from the waking world looked as ill as a man could get.

Still, at least he looked alive.

The same couldn't be said about the ragged man cowering at the foot of the statue in the center of the *raawa.* He was a living corpse. As if he'd been mauled by a wolf, his dirty blue robes were in tatters; rashes covered his face, his greenish skin taut on his skull. His hair was missing in patches, the strands that were left sticking to his sweat-soaked face.

Then there was the dream-eater.

Jespar knew it was the same creature he'd seen in Oonai's dream four days ago, that fist-sized, bulbous black sphere protruding from the back of Oonai's skull. Like its host, it was unrecognizable. Growing from a hole the size of two fists, the creature now resembled a giant centipede, broken into a dozen segments, thick as mooring rope. It climbed down the side of his face and wrapped twice around his neck, its head with its three long feelers slowly turning left and right. The first thought that crossed his mind was that he was glad Kawu didn't have to see it. Then he realized why that was, and, for just a heartbeat, felt grief welling up in him before the emptiness smothered it again, leaving only that maddening tickle by Jespar's parasite.

“Seven bloody hells,” Lysia whispered.

Jespar mumbled something in reply, then brushed away a strand of hair that had fallen into his eyes.

"Let's put him down."

Slowly, they carried Kawu to the first row of prayer cushions arranged in circles around the pool. They found one the red vines hadn't infested yet and eased him to the floor there, propping his head onto the cushion. His skin had taken on a yellowish complexion. Jespar watched him for some moments, then stood.

Strangely enough, he wasn't even shocked when he saw the Corpses that had materialized on the pillows. Kneeling, their hands folded in their laps as if in prayer, they were all facing Oonai, except for one whose eyes rested on Jespar, his lips and eyes drawn into this telltale sneer of shame and disappointment.

"You okay?" Lysia said beside him. She stood right inside one of the Corpses, her legs passing through his body like that of a ghost.

"It's communicating with its mother."

"What?"

"My dream-eater, I think it is communicating with Oonai's. I'm... seeing things that aren't there."

Lysia began to speak, then broke off. "Will you be okay?" she said quietly.

Jespar turned to look at Oonai—the First Magnate's gaze rested on them both, dull and empty. The dream-eater's head had stopped swaying and was poised in their direction—it was too dark to see its eyes from the distance, but Jespar knew it was looking at them just like Oonai. He exchanged a look with Lysia.

Then two memories passed through his mind; mundane, almost absurd given what they were facing, and the consequences if they failed. The first memory was his first kiss with Lysia, how she had withdrawn her lips from his, that dreamy smile around them, tendrils of violet nightflower smoke rising between their faces. The second was Kawu, curled up beside him on the finger-shaped rock, his head warm on Jespar's chest. One week. Two people he'd grown so close to.

What were the odds?

"Why are you smiling?" Lysia asked, a trace of worry in her voice.

"Nothing," Jespar said. "Are you ready?"

Lysia closed her eyes, then opened them. "Yeah. Whatever that means."

Chapter 26

Resurrection

ALL THE CORPSES WERE WATCHING HIM. Rain drizzled through the cracks in the ceiling, wind slithered through the cracks and slits in the walls. The violet moon dipped the scene into a surreal light.

While Oonai's gaze was fixed in their direction as Jespar and Lysia approached him, he didn't really seem to be seeing them, just like last time they'd been in his dream and found him in the infirmary. He had a faraway expression, as if gazing into a distant landscape. The parasite, on the other hand, did see them; six stable eyes firmed locked into their direction, its feelers swaying back and forth, its countless legs clawing the air as if looking for ground to hold on to.

This could be you.

The thought came several times as they crossed the raawa, but strangely enough it made him feel nothing. The void Kawu's death had left behind still dulled all emotions, except for the tickle in his skull that grew ever stronger the closer they got to the prayer pool and the statue at the foot of which Oonai was sitting.

They stopped two steps before the edge of the pool. The hole in the ceiling was right above it, allowing a delicate sheet of rain to pour into the godshouse, the drops pattering onto the illuminated water in a hypnotic rhythm. Jespar glanced over his shoulder. The corpses were still there, kneeling on the prayer cushions, palms resting flat on their thighs like faithful awaiting mass. Kawu lay on the outermost left row, head propped on the cushion and hands folded across his chest. *Still looking as if he's sleeping.*

"Gods..." Lysia said quietly, her face pale even in the gloom of the raawa. "He's half-dead."

She was right. Up close, the First Magnate looked even more gruesome than from afar. His skin stretched taut over his skull like ancient parchment, little insects crawling through his beard and hair. Like his face, his hands were dotted with rashes and his nails were so long they curled. Even from across the pool, the stench of urine, feces, and sickness was overpowering.

A strange feeling cut through the hollowness Jespar felt, one he wouldn't have thought himself capable of considering what the man before him had done. Pity. Seeing Oonai like this, it was hard to believe he was the same person who had caused so much suffering. It faded quickly, replaced by a dull realization.

This was it.

If they failed here, if their improvised plan didn't work, Oonai's subconscious would notice they didn't belong into the dream and expel them back into the In-Between, unable to re-enter. No more chances, no more dreamwalking, no more hope. Lysia would return to the real world, where she, Mâadira, Agaam, and the servants would face death by the rebels. Jespar would be taken right into his own nightmare the moment he awoke, into a world not unlike Oonai's that his parasite had created for him.

He looked at Lysia. "Are you ready?"

Lysia drew a long breath, closing her eyes. When she opened them again, that look of resignation she'd carried ever since learning the truth about Oonai was gone.

"Just what I expected," she said to Oonai.

He didn't react.

"Yes, Jaaros," Lysia said. "Just pretend I'm not there. That's your greatest asset, isn't it? The ability to ignore uncomfortable truths."

No reaction. Jespar gave Lysia a worried glance, but she didn't seem to be aware of him. The line of her jaw showed under her skin, her eyes narrowed to a slit. "Do you ever think about her? Our daughter?"

This time, Oonai looked up. "You don't know."

It's working.

He thinks we're part of the dream.

Lysia hesitated only a second. "I don't know what?"

"That it was a girl." There was a fragile, cracked quality to his voice, as if he hadn't spoken in a long time. "You... you don't know it was a girl."

Lysia snorted softly. Then her eyes drifted off, stopping at an obscured corner in the back of the raawa. When she spoke, her voice had grown quiet. "I do, Jaaros. Mothers know."

Oonai held her gaze a second longer, then dropped his eyes, staring at the pool, tinged violet by the moon's light. Quietly, he began to cry. The dream-eater's feelers perked up. Then, slowly, it began to move, slithering around Oonai's neck and up the side of his face while its body expanded and contracted like a waterskin repeatedly filled and emptied. Not before a new segment pushed out of the hole in Oonai's head, Jespar understood that the dream-eater was feeding.

Growing.

Cold, clammy sweat formed on his forehead. Unwillingly, he looked at the Corpses watching them from behind, whose smirks had turned into smiles. For a while, they just stood there, watching Oonai cry. When his tears ceased, the contractions of the dream-eater stopped and it had grown perhaps a finger longer, resting its head back on the First Magnate's shoulder.

A baby had materialized in Oonai's cradled arms. Though its skin was pink and clean and glistened from the rain, there was something unnatural about it. How stiff it was. How waxen.

Like Jespar, Oonai only now seemed to grow aware of it. With a feverish sob, Oonai pressed the baby close to his chest, tears and rain dropping from his face onto the toddler's body. "Look," he said to Lysia, a desperate edge to his voice. "She's still alive. We were wrong, vaota, she never died!"

For the first time, Jespar noticed the sheen on Lysia's eyes and cheeks. "You know that's not true," she said. "She's dead. Just like me."

"*No!*" Violently shaking his head, Oonai hugged the baby tighter, starting to stroke its thin black hair. "No, it's—"

The head broke off. For a heartbeat, Oonai held it in his hand, blood spraying from the base of its neck. Then he shrieked and let go, dropping it into the prayer pool where a blossom of blood enshrouded it. Jespar still stared at the little head floating in the water when Oonai wailed again. The baby continued falling apart in his arms, like a broken toy, first the hands, then the arms, then the little feet and legs, tumbling and rolling over Oonai's arms into the pool, until all that left was the round, bloody torso that had started to melt under the rain like hot wax. "What do you want from me?" Oonai sobbed. Red and black ooze seeped through his fingers, onto his robes, onto the pedestal. "Gods, what do you *want* from me?"

A sour taste had formed in Jespar's mouth. His hands were shaking.

Act.

He stepped forward. "What do you think we want, Oonai?"

Oonai looked at him as if noticing him for the first time. "Who... who are you?"

"My brother," Lysia said.

Oonai blinked. "I—I didn't know you had—"

"You didn't know a lot of things, Jaaros. Maybe because you never asked." She scoffed, shaking her head. "He's been traveling, you know? Chasing his fortune all across the Civilized World, just like the Big Dream taught him to do. He probably doesn't even know I'm dead yet."

"...I'm sorry," Oonai whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"I don't want you to be sorry," Jespar said. "I want you to answer my question. What do you think we want?"

Oonai opened his mouth, then closed it. "You're more punishment for my sins," Oonai said at last, speaking so quiet it was difficult to hear. "I created you so you can make me suffer."

It was the exact answer they had expected.

"Your sins," Jespar echoed. He let his eyes wander through the raawa, past the Corpses, past Kawu. "Impressive... It's just like my sister said. You really think this is all just about you."

A drop of water fell on Jespar's face. He looked up. The wind had gotten stronger, tilting the angle at which the rain fell through the ceiling. The clouds obscuring the moon had cleared, brightening the pale violet light that illumined the room.

Oonai's lips pressed into a white line, and for a second it looked as if he was about to burst into tears again. Then a dreamy expression came into his eyes, a strange mixture of agony and peace. "Not anymore. I ended it, and now I'm in hell and paying for my sins."

Ended it.

So that was the story the parasite had spun: The dreaming Oonai believed he had killed himself and was now suffering in an eternal purgatory.

What will it be like for you?

If they failed, what story would his parasite tell him once he was in his nightmare? Pictures rose to mind, of trials, of corpses, of knives.

Stop it.

Don't think about it.

Beside him, Lysia scoffed. "So that's what you think? You're in some kind of noble purgatory that exonerates you from all you've done?" Oonai looked at her. Then the corners of his mouth curled in a faint smile. Coupled with his ruined, cadaverous face, the sight was even more terrifying than seeing the baby fall apart in his arms. "I suffer," he said. "You have no idea, vaota. I suffer every day and every night, more than you can possibly imagine." He raised his hand, as if to stifle a protest. "But it's okay, I've made my peace with it. Remember that day you told me I'm a monster? You were right, I know that now... and I'm paying the price for it."

The rain was down to a delicate drizzle now, almost beautiful in the moonlight. Lightening flashed through the ruined godshouse, followed by a low thunder.

Jespar looked at Lysia for reassurance. She nodded briefly, fists balled at her sides.

Now came the gamble.

"What if I told you that you're not dead?" Jespar said. The dream-eater's feelers starting to move again. Jespar ignored it, fighting down the fear that had begun to manifest. "What if I told you you're not dead?" he repeated.

Oonai looked up. Undulled by clouds, the moonlight accentuated the sharp edges of his gaunt face, the raindrops glistening as they ran down his skin, pooling on the scab of his rashes. "I am dead," he said. "And this is hell. It's the only explanation."

"Close." Jespar stepped closer, as much as the prayer pool allowed it. "Yes, I guess you could say you're in hell. But in one you created."

The dream-eater perked its head. Oonai blinked. "I... don't understand."

"My brother is right," Lysia said. "You created this hell for yourself. Listen to your mind, and you'll know it's true." When Oonai didn't reply, she continued. "And that's the reason *we're* here. You're right, we're part of your mind... but the part of you that knows you can *still* set things right." She lifted a finger, pointing skyward. "If not for us or all the innocents who suffered under your actions, then for that one person up there you care about and who will die if you don't help."

The dream-eater's feelers moved faster, different than when it had been feeding. There was something cautious in it, something wary, as if it was listening for danger. For a heartbeat, Jespar was certain they had made a mistake, that their approach had been to blunt, too drastic, that they'd disrupted the narrative of the dream and that Oonai's subconscious would expel them.

"Nama." Oonai spoke softly, the dreamy look gone from his eyes and replaced by deep worry. "What's... what's wrong with her?"

"Someone hurt her and your beloved friend," Jespar said. "In fact, as you're down here wallowing in self-pity, your entire country is falling to pieces. Remember that plan you had? It completely spiraled out of control and right now there's an angry mob in front of the ziggurat gates."

"They'll hold." Oonai's words lacked conviction.

"Not much longer," Jespar said. "And if there's anyone who can still turn this around, it's you." *However that's supposed to work,* he added mentally." That's why you have to go back and save them."

Oonai studied him, his face flickering between disbelief and fear. "I... I don't understand. How can I go back? I'm dead, I—"

"That's what you want to believe, Jaaros," Lysia said. "But as we said, you're not dead. You can wake up any time, but you have to want it."

Sweat trailed down the sides of his face, his stomach a knot. Lysia's was the last line in their improvised play, the line that would decide over the lives of thousands and his own.

Silence unfolded between them, like a thick, gray fog. The rain had almost let up. Another lightning lit up the raawa, but it was weaker than the ones before, almost like an afterthought.

Then a woman's head materialized in Oonai's hands. Though it was made of pure charcoal, eyes closed, lips parted, Jespar recognized her at once; she had the same, pointy nose as her grandfather, the same high cheekbones.

Yamin.

Oonai met Jespar's eyes. "No."

A lightning flashed through the raawa, drowning the godshouse in a blinding light, followed by a deafening thunder. The rain set in again, twice as hard as before; the coal head started to dissolve in Oonai's hand, first slowly, then whole clumps. "You don't understand it. You don't understand anything." Still staring at Jespar, he clenched his fingers into a fist, bursting the head into dozens of small black clumps that crumbled into his lap. "Me, save someone? If this isn't a joke then I don't know what is."

Lysia started to say something, but Oonai cut her off. "I *have* tried, vaota, I've tried to put things right, tried to be better, but it was pointless, the damage was just too big." He croaked a laugh. "Saaras'jodule, did you know what the other magnates told me when I ordered them to revoke the decree? They told me they'd kick me out of the Coalition if I ever suggested doing 'something like that' again. And the worst of it all, I wrote the law that would have allowed them to do it, I wrote it." He tossed the rest of the head into the pool. "I am the architect of the arena, I'm the father of monsters, I'm the creator of the problem. You know what the priest told me that I went to see weeks after you died?" Another flash of lightning, this one so bright Jespar's vision turned momentarily white. "He told me that every sin leaves a mark on our soul and that these marks fester if we don't atone for them. I threatened and insulted him, of course, because what else could I

have done? Accepting what he'd said would have meant admitting the truth." A gust swept a sheet of rain towards Jespar and Lysia. Oonai raised his voice. "That I've never atoned for anything! That I've sinned and sinned and sinned, and never made up for it, and that if I had a soul in the first place there's nothing left of it by now but a fucking tumor!"

Overwhelmed by the intensity of his reaction, Jespar's mind raced as he tried to find an answer, but none came to mind. Lysia, on the other hand, didn't seem intimidated—if anything, Oonai's outbreak had only fueled her anger. "And your wife?" she said, voice raised to drown the thunder. "Are you just going to let her die?"

Oonai regarded his hands, washed clean by the heavy rain. "I couldn't stand to look at her," he said. "Not after what I've done."

Lysia's mouth twitched. She was shaking all over now, her fists balled so the white of her knuckles showed through. "What, and that justifies leaving her to die?"

Oonai gave her a sad smile. "Whatever they are facing, it's better than me. That's all there is to say." He dropped his gaze again and watched the pool—it was overflowing now, the water soaking into Jespar's boots rivulets snaking towards the entrance where the Corpses sat and Kawu lay. The dream-eater had settled back down on Oonai's shoulder, its feelers gently brushing on Oonai's neck like some grotesque gesture of affection.

Time passed, seconds and minutes melting into a shapeless mass. Jespar looked at Lysia, hoping she knew what to say, knew how to still turn this thing around, but when he saw her, he realized she had given up; she was still staring at the First Magnate, but the anger had left her like wind a sail, leaving behind only that resignation he had first seen on her when he'd told her the truth about Oonai in the ziggurat cellar.

Resignation.

Defeat.

Fatigue crashed down on him, the gathered weight of all the fear, pain, and strain of that cursed past week that had been supposed to be the start of something new. Unwillingly, he looked over his shoulder, where the Corpses still sat on their cushions

and watched him. They were smiling now—all teeth and no eyes, like wolves who had cornered their prey. Gluttons awaiting a feast.

Murderer.

He remembered his brothers and father nailed to the crosses, stripped off their skin.

Failure.

His sister, on that bright summer day, on the bloodstained sheets.

Coward.

Jespar on a ship, leaving, Enderal's silhouette shrinking on the horizon.

And a thought formed with perfect clarity.

Of course Lysia didn't know what to say. She didn't know because she was a fighter. Not in the sentimental meaning of the word; Lysia was a fighter because she approached obstacles by confrontation. If life threw a problem her way, she hit back, then hit back twice as hard if she missed, until either she or the problem were in the mud, covered in blood, tears, and bruises. But what people like her didn't realize was that often, their fighting was just a way of maintaining the illusion of control, of tricking themselves into believing there *was* something to be done, that they *could* fix things if only they fought hard enough, that it all came down to power of will. It didn't. Some problems couldn't be solved, some diseases couldn't be cured, some broken things couldn't be mended.

No, Lysia couldn't solve this, didn't know what to say, because she was fundamentally different from Jaaros Ismiraael Oonai, for all his talk of self-determination and chances.

Unlike Jespar.

"You didn't try."

At first it seemed as if Oonai hadn't heard. Then he raised his eyes. "What did you say?"

"You heard me," Jespar said, an empty smile forming on his lips that his eyes didn't mirror. "Honestly, you call that trying? Just sauntering into the Council and ordering the hyenas you placed in those seats to give up the bone you tossed them in the first place?" Jespar chuckled, so absurdly at odds with the gravity of their situation that he had to chuckle again. "How about Yamin's mother, hm? How about her grandfather? Did you

ever talk to them after it happened, did you ever own up to what you did, did you do *anything* at all to help them cope with their grief?"

Oonai said nothing, his eyes drawing together. The dream-eater stirred again, began slithering around his neck, like a hangman's noose going tighter.

"I didn't think so," Jespar said. A strange heat had taken hold of him, coursing through his veins and mind like battle fervor. "Let's face it, Oonai, all this 'trying' you did, was it about doing amends or was it about finding a way to clean the blood from your hands because you didn't like how sticky it felt?" Jespar stepped into the pool, the water freezing cold as it soaked into his boots. The rain grew heavier, and little ice pebbles had mixed into it—hail. "Let me tell you about 'trying', Jaaros Oonai. Trying is toiling away every single day in the nuvium mines, knowing that the dust will have eaten your lungs before you turn forty, because giving up would mean watching your children starve, trying is going down into the slum orphanages every day to stop the urchins from dying of simple infections, knowing bloody well you might wake up the day after with some contagious disease you caught there and for which there's no cure yet, trying is when you wake up every single fucking day knowing nothing in your life is going to change for the better but to still go on!" He made an angry, sweeping gesture. "That's 'trying', not some half-assed attempt at cleaning your conscience and then calling it quits when you realize it's harder to create than to destroy." He stepped closer, now only a step from the First Magnate. "So, come on, Oonai, let's drop the pretense. You never gave a shit for the people who suffered under your actions, not even after your ex-lover killed herself carrying your own child. What hurt you is that you finally realized you're not the visionary, self-forged legend you see yourself as but just another murderer who no one will mourn for when he finally bites the grass."

"You don't know me." Slowly, Oonai got to his feet, his balled fists shaking. Standing on the statue's pedestal, he towered a good three heads over Jespar, the hail hammering down upon them like chips of bone. "You have no *fucking* idea what I've been through."

The heat now raced through every inch of Jespar's body, his blood, his flesh, his bones. "Oh, yes, Jaaros Oonai," he said, "I know you, better than you think. I know about your

sad past, I know you came from nothing and made it farther than anyone could have imagined, but what does it matter? In the end, you're still just a man, and one who'll go down in history as willing to sacrifice thousands of innocents just for five more barrels of gold in your treasury and who had rather let the mother of his child jump off a cliff than take responsibility for his actions. Your child, for fuck's sake, your own child!" Something was happening to the light in the raawa, but Jespar didn't look up. The hail hit harder and harder, harrying him with blows, but somehow, the pain only made him angrier. "I mean, I have to hand it to you, in a way it's almost impressive, even now that you know people out there are dying by the thousands and you could save them, you still find a way to make this all about yourself. 'I couldn't face her,' 'the world's better off without me,' probably thinking that there's something noble in this fucked up fantasy your mind came up with." He shot a finger at Oonai, touching Oonai's chest. "Well, let me break it to you: you're not some martyr accepting the punishment for his transgressions, you're just a selfish asshole unwilling to own up to what he did and *do something* that helps anyone but yourself for a fucking change!"

Jespar's breath was fast and shallow, his finger shaking. Oonai, or the corpse the nightmare had turned him into, glared down on him, but he wasn't afraid. Just like something about the way Lysia had spoken to Oonai earlier, there was something else that had driven Jespar's words, something deeper. He and Oonai weren't so different after all. Yes, he was a vagrant and Oonai was a god. But in the end, both of them were men shutting their eyes from the truths they were too weak to confront. Jespar by running. Oonai by hiding first in his castle on the highest mountain of the island, and now in the place no one could find him.

The dream-eater wormed hysterically around Oonai's neck, its body expanding and contracting wider and faster, sucking up the pain of its host, but there was something erratic, something frantic and desperate about its movement. *Fear?*

"You know nothing," Oonai said. "You think you can judge me, you? Do you have any idea what I could do to you? I could gut you alive, then send your entrails to your family and still no one would dare to raise his voice against me." A gust crashed against the gate,

shaking it in the hinges. A hailstone big as an eyeball struck Jespar on the forehead, sending a stab of pain into his skull. *You're mad,* he thought. *He's going to kill you.*

"And it still wouldn't change a damn about the truth," Jespar shouted to overpower the tempest raging around them. "That you're a godsdamned coward!"

"I suffer!" Oonai screamed, spittle flying from his mouth. The dream-eater tossed about, his bulging and shrinking now so drastic it seemed like a balloon about to burst. Segment after segment crept out of Oonai's skull, each one thicker than the one before.

As if to pass the death sentence on Jespar's sanity, Jespar laughed. He thrust a finger to the sky—only now did he realize it hard turned into a maelstrom, lurid violet and black clouds twirling around a center of pure darkness. "And you think they care? You think anyone cares about your 'suffering'? Seven hells, Oonai, wake the fuck up! The world doesn't care about what you feel, it cares about what you do! No matter how many years you spend down here getting tortured by your own nightmares, to the people out there you might as well be dead! You're changing nothing, don't you get it, you're changing *nothing!*"

A piece of ceiling came loose and crashed down behind Jespar, cracking the basin of the prayer pool. The parasite now violently tossed back and forth, its feelers brushing Jespar's chest and neck and face as it did so. Another piece of rubble came down, this one smashing into the statue's head and snapping it off right with half of its torso. Oonai stared at Jespar, his eyes as turbulent as the vortex above them, his teeth skinned as if about to bite.

Then they cracked.

The tempest ceased and the dream-eater went limp.

Oonai reached out to Jespar. First, it seemed as if he was going for his throat—then he put his shaking hand on Jespar's shoulder instead. "I'm not like him," he whispered. His eyes, bloodshot and wet, looked like that of a different person now: Frail, hurt, pleading. The eyes of a broken boy. "I'm not like him."

It was as if the heat in Jespar had died with Oonai's anger. He became aware of the pain from the hail strikes, of the blood that trailed down his face. He wanted to speak, but his throat refused to form any words.

Say something.

Gods, say something.

There was a last silence, stretching on for what seemed minutes. Small pieces of debris crumbled from the ceiling, mixing with the last hailstones.

"Then prove it," Lysia said behind them.

Oonai looked at her, and, for a second, Jespar saw gratitude in them. "I will."

With his right, Oonai gripped the parasite and tore it out of his head. For the flicker of a second, there was resistance—then, with an oozing sound, it came out, together with a spray of blood. Briefly, it twitched in his hand. Then it went limp, and Oonai with it.

Behind Jespar, there was a sound like a breeze hitting blankets on a clothesline. When he turned around, the Corpses were gone—except for their robes that lay slowly billowed to the ground, one of which landed close to Kawu like a sheltering blanket.

The world spiraled into darkness.

Chapter 27

Breath

JESPAR'S SHEER EXHAUSTION blurred his last ascent through the In-Between into a collection of moments. Gazing down upon the sphere that was Oonai's *tuewa*, now but a swirl of mist slowly dissolving into the dark water. Kawu floating limply beside him. Oonai rising to the surface with his eyes closed.

We won, Jespar thought as the surface came closer. He held Kawu close, arms wrapped around him like that one night on the finger-shaped rock. *We won.* The parasite wouldn't kill him. Maybe he'd live.

The thought left him feeling nothing.

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He opened his eyes to a flickering pattern of light and shadow dancing across the rocky ceiling. The air was moist and warm, with an earthy, rotten smell. His back hurt under the hard stone.

A rugged, gray face was above him, one eye covered by an eye patch. Agaam.

"Are you okay?"

Agaam helped him sit, pulling Jespar up by the arm while supporting him by the shoulder. Jespar's vision blurred as he came upright, a headache spreading in his temples. His muscles were cold, as if he'd spent a night sleeping out in the open.

Agaam studied him, brows drawn together. "Are you okay, Ma'sao?

"Where's—" his voice broke. "Where's Lysia? Kawu?"

As he spoke, he felt an irrational hope that, maybe, Kawu had been wrong, that death in a dreamwalk didn't equate with death in the real world.

Agaam lowered his eyes. "She's awake. As is Ma'sao Oonai."

There was a short silence. Jespar felt the grief come, like a black hand reaching through the numbing fog that still dulled his emotions, and for a breath, his desire to cry was so overpowering that he wanted to scream.

Then the fog closed and the hand vanished.

"I see," he muttered. "I see."

He started to get to his feet, but then he noticed the way the old servant was staring at him.

Before he could ask what was wrong, he felt it: a dull pain throbbing in his right eye, as if something was pressing against the back of his eyeball. Warm liquid trickled down his cheek. He felt for it with his index finger. Blood. Eyes wide open, he looked Agaam.

"What—"

He didn't finish the sentence. Something moved just above his upper right eyelid. *Something alive.* His stomach turned and his vision blurred; before he knew it, he reeled over sideways. Agaam caught him just in time, shouting to someone over his shoulder. The pain swelled, more and more blood running into his eye, pouring down his cheek. Lysia came into his sight, gripping his jaw with one hand and turning his head so that he was facing her; then she pulled up his right eyelid with her other hand. For a heartbeat, the pain grew unbearable, and a small jet of blood sprayed from his eye. Bile rose in Jespar's throat, his limbs weakened.

Then the pressure vanished—and something *squeezed* through his upper lid and eyeball, dropping on Jespar's chest, then scurrying off towards the tunnel. It was black and small, maybe the size of a cockroach, but thinner and longer, and scurried as fast as a cat.

Gods.

Agaam's boot came down on it. Despite the parasite's size, there was a sickening crunch, like a walnut being cracked open. Agaam kept his boot down, then pulled it up a finger-length and stomped again, then again. When he lifted it, all that remained of the dream-eater was a black smear.

For a long moment, they didn't move. Agaam standing with the crushed dream-eater under the sole of his boot, Jespar half-sitting, half-lying on the cold stone tiles, Lysia holding him. Then he grew aware of the ruckus down the tunnel, hectic voices talking over each other. Kawu had asked them to move to another alcove in order to perform the walk.

As the blood slowly cleared from his eyes, he turned to look behind him. Kawu lay motionless in the gloom, resting on his back with his hands folded across his stomach.

Lysia said something.

Tired, Jespar thought as he looked at her. She looked so tired.

"I need to take care of that wound. Can I?"

Jespar nodded weakly.

She placed her hand over his eye. The air crackled, shimmered, and a soothing warmth spread across his eyes coupled with a stinging sensation. When it was over, the pain on his eyes was down to a throb, and his vision had started to clear.

"Thanks," he mumbled. "For everything."

Lysia's smile was hollow, like that at a funeral. "I think you're safe now. Kawu was right: Your dream-eater was linked to Oonai's."

Not knowing how to reply, Jespar nodded again.

"We should check on Oonai," Agaam said. He was standing at the opening of the alcove, peeking into the tunnel. The din was down to a mumble.

Carefully, Jespar and Agaam picked up Kawu, carrying him between them. Jespar felt another brief moment of hope when he touched Kawu's skin, noticing how warm it felt, warmer than it had been in the In-Between. Then he realized that in reality, Kawu had died only minutes ago, and his skin didn't have time to cool yet.

No one noticed them at first as they entered the other alcove. From the servants to the guards, the entire escort was gathered around the Oonais' stretchers, shielding them from sight. Only when the scarred soldier in the back who had accompanied Jespar became aware of Agaam and shouted something across the murmuring did the crowd part and let them through.

Jaaros Oonai sat on his stretcher, between Kawu's empty one and his wife's. He was talking to Sergeant Mâadira in a low voice while the physician stooped over him and was applying a bandage to his right eye. The white, mushy texture that had been covering his other eye was gone, as was the mist that had been rising from it. Dried blood covered the lower half of his right face, adding to his cadaverous appearance. Despite it all, he looked worlds apart from Oonai's avatar they'd confronted in the ruined ziggurat not long ago.

"Stars burn me," Lysia said under her breath when they stopped some steps from the Oonai. She was looking at a slimy heap near Mâadira, a sludge of silver slime, black carapace, and tiny legs, altogether the size of a small fist. *The dream-eater*, Jespar thought. Bile rose to his throat, but he swallowed it down.

When he turned his attention back to the stretcher, Oonai was looking at him. A part of him had anticipated that moment ever since it had all begun, and somehow, Jespar had expected it to be meaningful. There he was, the man whom his wife believed Jespar had been sent to save, the living god who had devised a scheme so terrifying it would have gone down in history. The father who had driven his lover and their child off a cliff and without whom Kawu would still be alive.

He felt nothing.

No fear, no anger, no hatred, not even that sense of familiarity he'd felt in Oonai's dream, when Jespar had persuaded him to let go.

They exchanged a nod. That was it.

"You did it," Mâadira said approaching them. "Gods, you—"

Noticing Kawu, she broke off and her face clouded.

"Everyone out," Agaam said to the crowd. "Now. Go back to the root cellar and wait for us."

All faces turned to Oonai. He made a weak hand gesture, indicating assent. "Ma'sao," the physician said, "I'm not do—"

"Varroy will take care of it," Agaam said. He nodded at Mâadira. "You go too. I'm sorry."

Mâadira was about to protest, but then Oonai curtly nodded at her. She lowered her head, then made a sweeping gesture to the crowd. As the room emptied, Lysia treated Oonai's wound. His right eye was a bloody mess, and had it not been for the anesthetic that Oonai explained the physician had given him, he would have probably been screaming. Lysia removed the bandage the physician had applied, then cleaned it again, performed a small shift, and dressed it, her movements rough and mechanical.

"The bug damaged your optical nerves quite a bit," she said when she was done, handing him a flask and indicating for him to drink. He obliged wordlessly. "I can't guarantee you'll ever regain full vision." *And I couldn't care less if you do*, her eyes seemed to add.

"I see." There was no discernible emotion in Oonai's voice.

Jespar and Agaam both stood a few steps from the First Magnate, arms crossed. They had rested Kawu's body on the ground, with his back leaning against the cave wall. From the way his eyes were closed and his face turned upward, Kawu almost looked like he was sleeping.

Agaam stepped forward, stopping barely an arm-length from the First Magnate. Jespar tensed, wondering what the old servant would do next.

Then he bowed his head. "Ma'sao Oonai," he said, "we need your help."

He summarized the events of the past week, speaking in even tones and a flat voice, like a courier reading a message. There was no anger when he recounted the events in Kâara Manor, and no grief when he told Oonai of what happened to his best friend and his wife. He didn't mention he knew Yamin, let alone that he was her grandfather, and claimed Jespar and Lysia had found out about the affair and Oonai's self-infection on her own. That last part sounded more than implausible, but Oonai didn't ask questions—he just sat there with a blank face, listening and holding his sleeping wife's hand.

When Agaam was done, a long silence spread between them.

"So?" Lysia asked. "Can you help us or not?"

Oonai sighed heavily. "I don't know. I need to think."

Before Lysia had a chance to reply, Agaam raised his hand.

"I'm afraid we can afford half an hour at most."

"That should be enough." Oonai hesitated. "I want privacy."

Jespar and Lysia exchanged an incredulous glance, but Agaam didn't move a muscle. "As you wish. Then I suggest you take a walk down the tunnels, ma'sao."

"I will do that," Oonai said.

Agaam nodded. "Please don't stray too far."

"Hold on," Lysia protested. "You can't—"

Agaam made a sharp gesture, signaling her to sit down. Lysia hesitated, then obliged and watched as Oonai left, walking slowly as if he struggled to remember the motions. In the mouth of the alcove, he stopped.

"Agaam?"

"Ma'sao?" the old servant replied. "Thank you. For your loyalty."

Something changed in Agaam's eye—like a polished mirror cracking and revealing the dark corridor that lay beyond. It lasted for only a second, then an empty smile came on Agaam's lips. "Always, ma'sao."

Oonai seemed oblivious to the change that had taken place on the old servant's face. He cast a long glance at his wife. Then he disappeared into the shadows of the tunnel.

Some minutes later, when his footsteps had faded, Lysia broke the silence. "Are you insane?!Letting him go?"

"He'll come back," Agaam said. He stood with his back facing Jespar and Lysia, studying one of the torches.

"And if he doesn't? Stars burn me, how the hells could you possibly trust him with that after all he's done?"

Agaam turned to face her. "I *don't* trust him. If he goes too far or tries to flee, I'll notice."

Psionics, Jespar thought. *Of course.*

Agaam walked over to Oonai's stretcher and sat down on the edge, hands folded between his knees and regarding the Ma'saa. Even though Jespar had witnessed the

magic that had ravaged her body, he still had difficulty connecting the crone in the stretcher, with her wispy white hair and her sharp bones to the woman he had talked to just days ago. The physicians had exchanged her bloody, dirty purple dress for a white silk robe, making her look like a woman on a hospice bed. Even if they survived this, how long would she have left to live? Twenty years? Ten?

"He *will* come back," Agaam said. "I know it. Because of the Ma'saa, because he wants to stop the rebels as much as we do, but also because…" his voice trailed off.

"What?" Lysia asked, frowning.

Agaam shook his head. "I don't know. I might be wrong."

They sat in silence, each alone with their thoughts. To stop himself from looking at Kawu's corpse, Jespar closed his eyes and began to count his breaths.

Twenty.

Sixty.

Two hundred.

Eventually, his thoughts trailed off again and his lids had grown heavy, his head bobbing back and forth as he moved between dozing and awake, the sounds of the crackling torches and their breaths enshrouding him.

How different they sounded.

Lysia's breaths were long and deep, the Ma'saa's ragged and shallow, his own short and steady. Agaam's was barely audible, slow and controlled.

Oonai's—

What?

He opened his eyes. The First Magnate still hadn't returned. Lysia regarded her fingers, Agaam looked at the ground. The Ma'saa's still lay as before, a ghastly shape in her white robes.

And yet, there it was. Someone else in the room was breathing.

When Jespar finally connected the dots, he leapt do his feet, so abrupt that Lysia gave a start. He hurried over to where they'd rested Kawu's body. His heart hammering, Jespar put his ear to Kawu's mouth and his flat hand on his chest.

He breathed. The chest moved.

"He's alive," Jespar muttered.

Lysia had come up beside him, her eyebrows drawn together. When she noticed, her face froze. "Stars burn me."

"He's alive," Jespar repeated, louder. He made a sound both sob and a laugh. "Gods, he's alive!"

"Let me," Lysia said, ushering him to the side. Hesitantly, he obliged. Agaam had walked over to them, watching them with crossed arms.

Lysia felt Kawu's pulse, then his heartbeat, the disbelief on her face growing with each action. When she was done, she sat back on her knees.

"That's impossible. He *was* dead."

"Help him, Lysia," Jespar said softly, "Please."

Lysia hesitated. "I don't know how. His vital signs are all steady, he's just…" her voice trailed off. "Wait."

She laced her fingers around Kawu's head and put her forehead against his. The air began to shimmer around then, and Lysia clenched her teeth, her neck veins bulging. When she let go and leaned back with a heavy exhale, sweat beaded on her forehead and she had turned pale.

"What did you do?" Jespar asked. "Is he okay?"

Weakly, she nodded at Kawu. His eyes were still closed and the movements of his chest shallow, but some of the color had returned to his cheeks.

Agaam sank to his haunches beside them. "What did you do?"

Lysia wiped the sweat off her forehead. "I believe these symptoms he got after the refocusings were basically arcane fever—each time he refocused Jespar was a small shift counteracting the shifts of the dream-eater." She paused. "That's why he came back."

"What do you mean?"

"When your dream-eater died, the shift it maintained on you stopped."

"And thus, the effect on Nākhani," Agaam said quietly.

Lysia shook her head. “Not entirely. I reversed some of the damage the arcane fever had done to his brain, but I’m sure some of it is irreversible. It will be a long time until he wakes up, and even then, there’s no saying in what condition he’ll be in.” She paused, looking at the ground. “*If* he wakes up.”

There was a long silence. Then Jespar put his hands on Lysia’s shoulder and pressed it lightly. “Thank you.”

Her bloodshot eye creased in a tired smile. She seemed about to speak, then fell silent, looking at the alcove entrance.

Oonai had returned.

The First Magnate looked at them indecisively, as if asking for permission to enter.

Agaam stood and lowered his head, giving his best impression of a loyal servant. “Ma’sao. You’re back.”

“Yes.” Oonai let his eyes wander across the alcove, stopping at his wife.

Lysia’s words echoed in Jespar’s mind.

Prove it.

“I have an idea.”

Patrons

10$ and above. You rock!

Alexander Herold
Alkiviadis Chatzivasileiou
Caleb Maher
Fabian Alt
Ellis Delira
Dr. Uwe Schreiber
GeneralJade
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Patrick Lenk

Afterword

First and foremost: Thank you for reading! I mean it. Life is the time we have, and you invested some of yours into this book. I appreciate it.

Every Day Like the Last is probably the most personal project I've ever created, and also the most daunting. Despite being available for free, I want it to be as good as possible, which means considerable expenses that I currently cover myself. These include cover art, editing, translation, and layout.

So, if you enjoyed the novel, would like to support me and have a couple of bucks to spare – I'm grateful for every Patreon, no matter the pledge. I'm giving my best to provide value in return – just head over to my page and check it out.

If you don't have any money to spare, no problem! Just keep reading, that's the biggest support you can give me. Also, feel free to share the word or leave me a review and a rating at Goodreads, WebFictionGuide or Muse's Success – those really help! Finally, I have a newsletter through which I'm planning to notify you when the paperback releases.

Thank you again, and see you next week!
Nicolas

Glossary

Term	Meaning
Inâl (in-ALL)	The language spoken across the Civilized World, developed by the Light-Born Morala (see "Morala"). Most countries, except for Nehrim (see "Nehrim") and Enderal (see "Enderal"), have their own native languages, as well as Inâl-based creoles used by those less proficient in speaking Inâl.
Civilized World	The parts of Vyn under the official control of the Light-Born. Not all parts of the world are regarded as "civilized"; those which are not under the Light-Born's reign are referred to as "uncivilized" or "Godless."
Vyn (VIN)	The name for the whole world, of which Kilé is just one continent of several.
Light-Born	Most commonly referred to simply as "the Gods," the Light-Born are, in fact, seven Aeterna arcanists who, through their magic, discovered a way to extend their lives indefinitely, becoming virtually immortal. Most people are completely unaware of this fact, assuming they always existed as Gods following their appearance after Starfall (see "Starfall"), but more educated people have known the truth of their nature for a long time. Since they are not *truly* immortal, the Light-Born require the protection of the Seraphim and the Holy Order (see "Holy Order"), the two most powerful military units in all of Vyn.
Aeterna (ee-TURN-ah)	The long-lived, naturally magically talented people of Vyn who were once more powerful before Starfall. Today, they are a heavily oppressed racial minority in nearly every continent of the Civilized World, targeted primarily for slave labor and minstrelsy.
Starfall	The devastating event when a comet crashed into Vyn, breaking apart the ancient supercontinent known as Pangora into the new continents that constitute modern-day Vyn. It is believed to be the culmination in a destructive conflict

	between the Aeterna and the Starlings known as the "Star War." Starfall marked the end of the domination of the Aeterna over Vyn, the first appearance of the Starlings in that world, and the rise of the Light-Born. The event is so influential to the history of Vyn that the beginning of recorded history is reckoned as the year "0 after Starfall," or 0 a. St.
Starlings	A small-statured people, the Starlings claim to have entered the world of Vyn on the comet later known as Starfall, but their memory of their original home world is, at best, fuzzy. Over the millennia, the Starlings have mixed with the other races of Vyn, so that, in truth, most Starlings would be more accurately referred to as *half*-Starlings. The Starlings are short and lithe- framed, having pointed ears similar to the Aeterna, with whom they were once bitter rivals. They are known for their inventive genius, as they are capable of crafting enormous flying ships powered by magic and steam called "Starships" and worker constructs resembling bronze-colored spiders. Whether their genius is the result of traditions passed down over the generations or a natural aptitude for mechanical engineering is not entirely known.
Inodan (IN-oh-dan)	A city in the clouds somewhere over the Red Sea, from where the Light-Born rule over the Civilized World. Inodan's location is a closely guarded secret.
Holy Order	Often referred to simply as "the Order" for their ubiquity, the Holy Order is a military religious organization ruling over the continent of Enderal as a theocratic military dictatorship in the name of the Light-Born Malphas, the Guardian God. The Order is one of two military units acting as the enforcers of the Light-Born's reign, the other being the Seraphim, who act as the personal bodyguards of the Gods.
Magnate	The title used for one of the seven leaders of the Blue Islands Coalition who rule over Kilé.
Blue Islands Coalition	A consortium of merchants who effectively rule over the Kiléan archipelago and serve as a substitute government for Morala, the "official" ruler of Kilé (see "Morala").
Makehu	The people indigenous to the archipelago, they are small in

(mah-KAY-hooh)	stature, darker-skinned than the bronze-skinned Kiléans, and have crescent-shaped eyes and broad faces.
Kilé (keel-AY)	An island archipelago in the Civilized World, known for being the center of trade and for its people's business acumen.
Uunil-Yâr (OO-neel YAWR)	The capital of Kilé, located on Uunil Island, the largest island of the archipelago, it is nicknamed the "Golden City" for the extreme wealth of the Magnates of the Blue Islands Coalition.
Kiia (KEE-yah)	A small island in the outer belt of the archipelago located northwest of Uunil, known for being one of the last remaining places where lobster colonies can survive without human encroachment.
Dreamwalker	A Makehu shaman who possesses the ability to enter other people's dreams. Even when awake, dreamwalkers are in a constant state of lucid dreaming, an ability which allows them to shape their dreams to their liking in the real world. The dreamwalkers are revered and feared in equal parts, even among their own people.
Yuva (YOO-vah)	An island on the southeastern edge of the archipelago, it is the center of Kilé's nuvium production. Due to excessive mining, however, Yuva is completely barren and, hence, free of any kind of vegetation besides shrubs and bushes.
Golden Soil Decree	A highly controversial and deeply unpopular ruling made by the Blue Islands Coalition that has privatized virtually all the remaining public land in Kilé, resulting in a growing insurgent movement among the poor.
Scythe	An insurgent terrorist organization aiming for the radical redistribution of wealth in Kilé — by force, if necessary — as a way to alleviate the extreme income inequality of the country.
Morala (mor-AH-lah)	The goddess of trade, fertility, and cunning, Morala is the official ruler of Kilé, being that country's patron Light-Born, although, in practice, the Blue Islands Coalition holds the real political power. It is said that she developed the language of

	Inâl, which serves as the lingua franca of Vyn.
Qyra (KEE-rah)	A large continent composed mostly of a vast, barren desert in the interior with tropical and subtropical coastal and riverine regions, Qyra lies east of Nehrim, separated by a narrow strait known as the Spice Channel. There is disagreement among scholars over whether Qyra or Nehrim is the largest continent in all of Vyn. Qyra is known for being the land over which the Light-Born Saldrin, the God of Knowledge and the Arts and Sciences, reigns; thus, the country has a reputation for the open-mindedness of its people and for its centers of learning.
Melây (meh-LAY)	A mostly barren island country far to the north of Kilé. Despite its unforgiving landscape, the eponymous capital city is among the wealthiest in the Civilized World. It is also known for being the home of the organization of assassins known as "the Petrified."
Enderal (EN-der-ALL)	Enderal is a large and somewhat isolated continent with a very diverse geography, being the home of forests in a permanent state of autumn foliage, a large, magically contaminated region, heathlands, and even deserts. Its capital, Ark, is where one can find the headquarters of the Holy Order (see "Holy Order"). Enderal is the homeland of Jespar Dal'Varek (see "Jespar Mitumial Dal'Varek").
Nehrim (NEH-rim/NEE-rim)	Nehrim is a large, geographically diverse continent unique among the Civilized World for being split into three distinct cultural and political entities. As with Qyra, there is disagreement among scholars over whether Nehrim is the largest continent in all of Vyn. The Northrealm is locked in a bitter war for independence from the Middlerealm, widely considered to be the "official" power in Nehrim. The Southrealm is the "uncivilized," Godless part of Nehrim, as it is under the yoke of a tyrannical theocratic dictatorship led by the cult of the Creator's Temple, a monotheistic sect of religious fundamentalists who believe in a single god whom they call "the Creator."
Blue Guard	The armed forces of Kilé, the Blue Guard has a ubiquitous presence over the archipelago.

Arm-length / Finger-length	The standard units of measure used across the Civilized World for long and short length, respectively.
Sea of Eventualities	The "Sea of Eventualities" is the scientific term used by scholars to describe the multiple parallel realities which coexist simultaneously in the universe. Arcanists are able to perform their unusual feats, such as conjuring a fireball, by transferring single elements of other realities into their own. As there is a reality for every possible outcome, there is virtually no limit to what an arcanist can do with magic – at least in theory. However, the act of transferring elements from other realities is highly straining on the arcanist's mind, especially when performing healing magic. This mental strain is known as "Arcanist's Fever," and it is fatal when left untreated for too long, its only source of treatment being a bitter herb extract called "Ambrosia."
Droga, pl. Drogae (DRAW-gah/DROH-gah); (DRAW-gay/DROH-gay**)**	The Inâl dialectal word for "drugs."
Nightflower	A popular droga with a sedative, calming effect that grows in subtropical climates and is consumed all over the Civilized World. Also known as "Peaceweed."

Characters

Name	Description
Jespar Mitumial Dal'Varek (jes-PAHR mi-TOO-mi-all doll-VAH-reck)	The protagonist and main point of view for most of the story, Jespar is a young mercenary and treasure hunter from the continent of Enderal (see "Enderal").
Counselor Zagash Enkshi (za-GASH ENK-shee)	The half-Qyranian, half-Kiléan personal adviser to the First Magnate, Jaaros Oonai.
Nayima Oonai (nah-YEE-mah OOH-nigh)	Jaaros Oonai's wife and offspring of one of the oldest Kiléan noble families.
Jaaros Ismiraael Oonai (YAH-rows ees-mee-RAH-ell OOH-nigh)	First Magnate of the Blue Islands Coalition, whose coma plays a central role in the story of "Dreams of the Dying."
White Twins	So called because of their albinism, the White Twins are two half-Aeterna siblings who lead the insurgent movement known as the Scythe (see "Scythe"); they are former soldiers of the Jade Carapace, the elite unit within the Blue Guard.
Sergeant Mâadira (MAW-ah-dee-rah)	A high-ranking military officer within the Blue Guard, she is tasked with the protection of Jaaros Oonai.
Major-General Duul (DOOL)	The highest-ranking general in the Blue Guard.
Xeelo Agaam (KSEE-low ah-GAHM)	The Oonai Ziggurat's one-eyed head servant.
Damean Dal'Varek (DAME-ian doll-VAH-reck)	The father of Jespar Dal'Varek, his youngest son, he was an influential judge of the Tribunal, the judicial branch of the Holy Order, known for his piety and devotion to Malphas and his uncompromising sense of justice. He died in what is widely considered to have been a horrible accident along with his two older sons.
Lysia Varroy (LIH-see-yah vah-	A traveling healer and former priestess of the White Leaf.

ROY)	
Kawu Nākhani (KAH-wooh nawk-HAH-nee	A young Makehu man who has inherited the ability to dreamwalk from his mother, Takana, whose mental health has deteriorated for her to be helpful to Jaaros Oonai.

Dictionary

General expressions

Expression	Meaning
"Thank the Gods" / "Godsdamned" / "By the Gods"	Different expressions referring to the seven Light-Born.
"By the name of the Sun"	A versatile phrase used to express exasperation, frustration, surprise, terror, or dismay.
"Stars burn me"/"Stars burn you"	A curse equivalent to saying, "May you rot in hell," when addressed to someone else; when referring to the speaker, it has the quality of expressing surprise rather than contempt. Commonly used in Melây, which was the impact point of the comet that tore apart Pangora, the ancient supercontinent (see "Starfall").
"Esara's tits"	A curse used to indicate exasperation, shock, disgust, or anger. Highly vulgar.

Kiléan Inâl

Expression	Meaning
Ma'saa/Ma'sao, *pl.* Ma'sae (mah-SAH/mah-SOW/mah-SAY-oh); (mah-SAY/mah-SIGH)	A respectful way of addressing a woman or a man, equivalent to the Endralean "mydame" and "mysir," respectively.
Saaras'Jodule (SAH-rahs yo-DOOL-ay)	A Kiléan curse used to indicate exasperation, shock, disgust, or anger, understood to mean, "You drain my pockets/spirits."
Vaota (VOW-tah/vay-OH-tah)	An affectionate nickname reserved for loved ones.

Yuz (YOOZ)	The Kiléan word for "Yes"
Kazuum (kah-ZOOM)	A versatile Kiléan derogatory term variously meaning "scum," an "idiot," a "coinless/penniless fool," or a "useless person."
"May you prosper"	A common Kiléan greeting.
"Coinless/penniless"	A Kiléan insult used to deride someone based on one's wealth. The wealthier someone is, the harder they are assumed to have worked to have become so wealthy; thus, to be "coinless" or "penniless" is to forfeit one's worth for laziness, hence its insulting power.
Raawa (RAH-wah)	The Kiléan word for "chapel(s)," or "place(s) of worship"; literally "gods' house."
Sa'nuu (SAH-nooh)	A public place for drug consumption, understood to mean the "tent of dreams."
Sêr/caya (SAYR/SEHR); (KAH-yah/KAY-ah)	A sêr is the main Kiléan currency, equal to 100 caya. In terms of importance, sêr is equivalent to the Endralean and Nehrimese penny.

Makehu

Expression	**Meaning**
Tuewa (TOO-eh-wah)	A Makehu word term used to describe a whole "world of dreams" or one's own particular dream world as distinct from the entirety of the world of dreams.
The "In-Between"	A Makehu expression for the endless black ocean separating the dream world from the real world.
Akhara (ak-HAH-rah)	Makehu for the waking, "real world."
Ngea (un-GAY-ah)	A Makehu exclamation, meaning "Begone!"

Kweh (KWEH/KWAY)	A Makehu curse used to indicate anger or exasperation.
Wakhem (WAHK-hem)	A derogatory term for non-Makehu — Kiléans, in particular — that roughly translates as “vulture.”